ELECTRONIC SOUND

THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC MAGAZINE

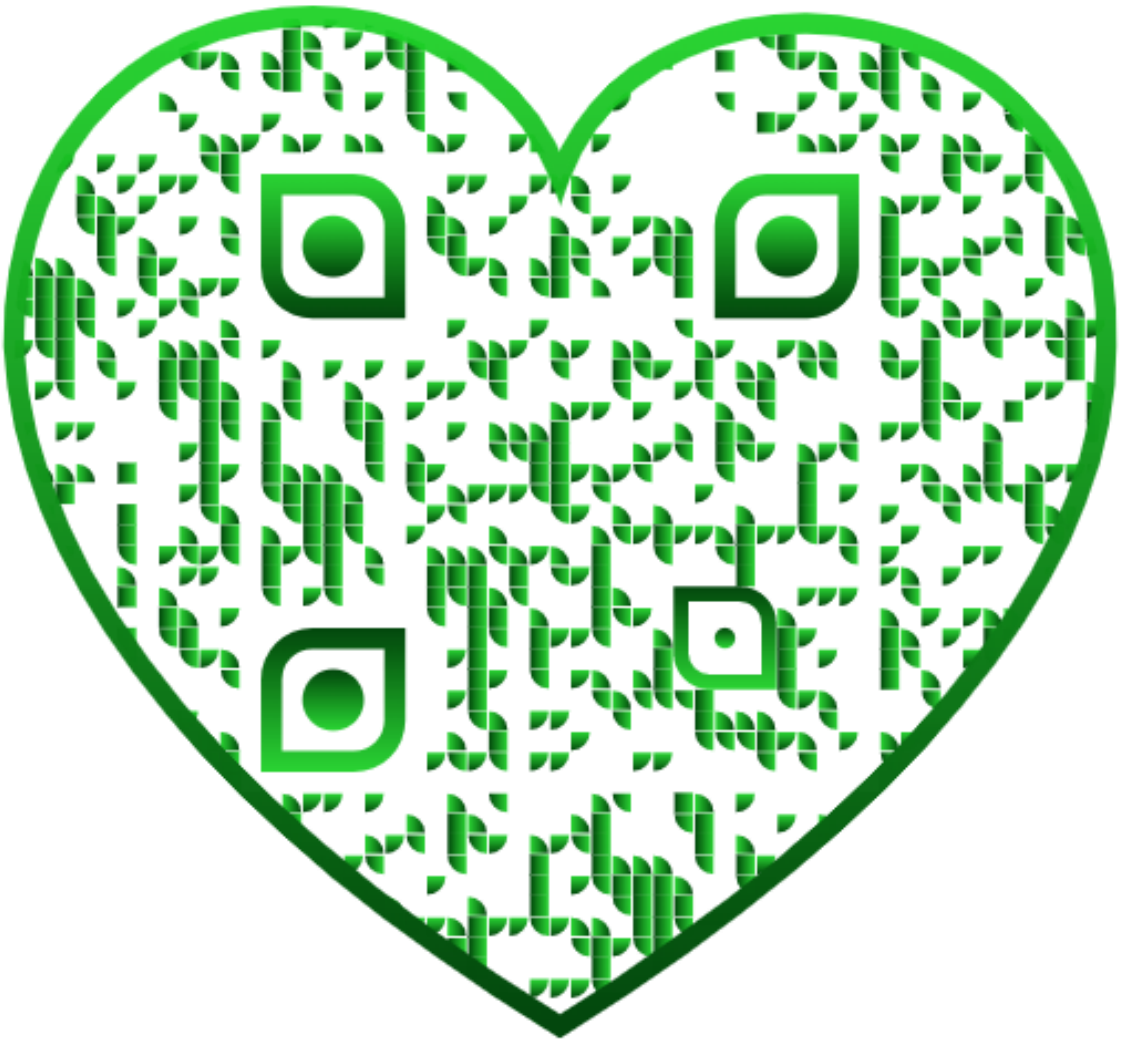
£7.99

British Electric Foundation

THE STORY OF 'MUSIC FOR STOWAWAYS'

RYUICHI SAKAMOTO / SPARKS / PENELOPE TRAPPES / NATHAN FAKE / TREES SPEAK / GILROY MERE

SOME KIND OF HEAVEN



101 WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

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In the search for overlooked albums to reappraise and celebrate, British Electric Foundation's 'Music For Stowaways' is a corker. Originally released only on cassette but now reissued on vinyl by Cold Spring, the album was both an experimental lab report and a statement of intent.

Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh are pictured on the front of this month's Electronic Sound in a 1981 shot taken by Melody Maker photographer Tom Sheehan. Freshly ejected from The Human League, the pair were embarking on an audacious creative spurt that would see them release BEF's 'Music For Stowaways' and their Heaven 17 debut with Glenn Gregory, 'Penthouse And Pavement', within months of each other. The Human League's 'Dare' hit the shelves just a few weeks later. It was a spectacular year for Sheffield's synthesiser sons, as Martyn happily acknowledges in Neil Mason's eye-opening cover feature.

Everything Martyn and Ian did was connected. 'Music For Stowaways' was specifically put together for Sony's brand-new Stowaway, later better known as the Walkman, and was effectively a sonic showreel of try-outs and experiments to demonstrate what they were capable of. And all of it – those early Human League records, the BEF tape and the Heaven 17 album – was aimed at an audience they believed were yearning for a life way beyond the grim reality of the UK in the late 70s and early 80s. "We were trying to reach young people who were interested in a brighter future," declares Martyn. More than 40 years on, the music they made back then somehow still feels like it's focused on the future. And the same is true of much of the music they inspired others to make too.

We should quickly mention that we have a fabulous Martyn Ware seven-inch to accompany this month's magazine as well – read all about it on page 6 – while our other interviews include Sparks, Penelope Trappes, Nathan Fake, Nick Rhodes, Anne Clark, Gilroy Mere, Trees Speak and Richard Anthony Hewson, the man who lent his initials to The RAH Band. Hey, we all still love a bit of 'The Crunch', right?

We also have a piece about Ryuichi Sakamoto, whose death was announced at the end of March, a couple of days after the last issue of Electronic Sound went to press. Although his passing followed a long illness and was not unexpected, the news still came as a tremendous shock. Given his catalogue of enriching and groundbreaking work over a 45-year career – with Yellow Magic Orchestra, as a solo artist, and collaboratively – Sakamoto's influence can't be overstated. The electronic world already feels like a poorer place without him.

Electronically yours,
Push and Mark

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OPEN REEL ENSEMBLE

Tokyo

APRIL 2023

Never mind the vinyl revival. Here's the Open Reel Ensemble. For over a decade, this Japanese trio has been wiping the dust off a once-presumed dead format – the reel-to-reel tape machine – and pushing its sonic possibilities further than ever before.

Made up of Ei Wada and brothers Haruka and Masaru Yoshida, their explosive 21st century rendering of tape music combines turntablism with musique concrète, while chucking in some good old-fashioned musicianship and performance art. All of which led to them snagging the attention of Ryuichi Sakamoto, who released their first eponymous album on his Commmons label back in 2012.

Now these Tokyo tape punks are back with 'Magnetize', a terrific four-track EP accompanied by a 50-page digital book which contains a "story of oblivion and liberation in the twilight of Magnesia, a city of magnetic memories…".

And they still are, they say, "delusional about the Magnetikpunk world where magnetic technology has developed beyond the realm of reality, and play reel-to-reel tape recorders as magnetic folklore instruments".

This image is from the music video for 'Magnetize', and shows the trio constructing rhythms by bashing taut, elongated tape loops on a loom, resulting in the tape jerking across a playhead a few millimetres, enough for it to blurt out noises which pass for kick drums and snares. Vintage tape machines are manhandled in real time for melodies and textures, building up to the crescendo, as tape begins raining down from the ceiling, filling the room until each performer is up to their waists in the stuff.

Pierre Schaeffer himself would be proud. Possibly horrified. Probably wanting to get in on the whole operation.

READER OFFER

Exclusive reader-only limited editions

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Martyn Ware
‘Unknowable’ / ‘I Am An Insect’
Transparent blue vinyl seven-inch

British Electric Foundation and Heaven 17 man Martyn Ware talks us through the two tracks on our exclusive Reader Offer single, neither of which has been commercially available before

‘UNKNOWABLE’

The A-side of this month’s limited edition single is a sumptuous and glorious soundscape from Martyn Ware, packed with shards of twinkling melodies and propelled by effortlessly chilled beats.

“This is an extract from a suite of four or five pieces that are all based around the same composition but in different versions,” says Martyn. “They were originally written and recorded as ambient music for Hearts On Fire, an American diamond retailer. They approached Illustrious, my 3D sound company, and asked us if we’d come up with some music they could play in their stores.

“I think this must have been in around 2011 or 2012. Hearts On Fire were opening lots of new stores at the time – they were kind of minimalist, all white, very futuristic-looking places – and they wanted something that would help to create an atmosphere and keep people engaged while they were there. I guess the idea was to try and encourage them to stay longer, so they would spend more money.

“I’d say that this is probably my favourite part of the whole suite. Some of the pieces are a lot more ambient than this – they don’t have rhythms, for instance – whereas this section is the most song-like. In fact, it was actually written in anticipation of it being a song. I was hoping we could do a top line for it and turn it into a Heaven 17 track, but Glenn Gregory never took to it.

“Glenn and I have got quite a few half-finished things we did around this time that are in a soundscape mode. We’d like to release some of them at some point, but I’ve been holding on for Glenn to tell me he’s got enough time to finish them. I think I might be waiting a long while for that!”

‘I AM AN INSECT’

Flip the record over for another captivating instrumental track, this time co-written by Martyn’s son Gabriel and featuring the sound of countless little beasties buzzing around and beetling about.

“I’m involved in an ongoing project with an organisation called Forest Of Imagination,” explains Martyn. “It was started by Penny Hay from Bath Spa University and Andrew Grant from Grant Associates, who are urban planners for futuristic city developments. They’ve created lots of installations in Bath over the years.

“I’ve always been interested in sensory spaces in urban environments and I love the fact that Forest Of Imagination have come up with so many different concepts for these installations in the centre of Bath. But there was this one occasion – I think it was in 2016 – when they staged an event in the grounds of the university, which is on the outskirts of the city.

“When we looked around the site, there was an area that was an ancient glade, the remains of an ancient forest, and I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we could put a 3D soundscape in there?’. So my son Gabriel, who is the lead composer at Illustrious, wrote this beautiful piece of music. The idea was to put the visitors into a semi-hypnotised state, where they’re in this amazing place and they feel like they’re in a film.

“A bit later, I noticed you could get little rechargeable speakers for about a tenner online and you could put an SD card in them. We recorded lots of insect sounds and attached these speakers to some helmets we bought – a different insect for each helmet – which we then gave out to kids so they could wander around the site and participate in the soundscape as ‘insects’.

“That’s why this track is called ‘I Am An Insect’. It was massively popular and I’d love to re-stage it in an urban environment at some point. I think that would be even more powerful.”

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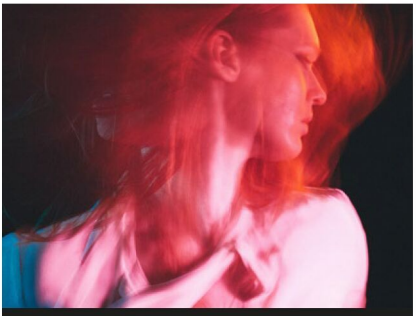
COLOUR ME GREEN

Eco speaker returns with a bang

Designed to combat planned obsolescence, Gomi's new Collection One speaker is made entirely from recycled materials. Built to order from the company's HQ in Brighton, the Collection One produces half the CO_2 emissions of other comparable products, and contains a full-range neodymium driver for superb highs and lows. You have the option to connect your device through an AUX or wirelessly through Bluetooth, as well as to pair two speakers for stereo listening, while a full two-hour charge will give you a colossal 30 hours of usage. They come in Panther, Avalanche and Ultraviolet flavours for £299, and each of its 29 component parts is repairable and upgradable too. Though they're currently only available in the UK, we highly recommend 'em. **gomi.design**



PULSE

HAZEL MILLS

Synthpopper partners with big hitters

WHO?

Bristol multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Hazel Mills has toured the globe with some of electronic music's biggest names, playing alongside the likes of Goldfrapp, Hannah Peel and The Will Gregory Moog Ensemble. You'll be pleased to know she is now turning her attention to her own music output, with her forthcoming EP, 'The Embrace', arriving chock-full of glistening electropop.

WHY HAZEL MILLS?

Mills has a knack for merging pure pop with experimental sounds. Her torch-song vocals tell deep, forlorn tales of love with the strangeness of Kate Bush, the epic lifts of Eurythmics, and instrumentation that chimes like a Ryuichi Sakamoto soundscape. Yet underneath it all is big, emotional and accessible *pop*. This is perfectly captured on 'The Embrace', which explores a battle between technology and nature. "Perhaps my eco-anxiety just wants to find a way to unite them," she says. Subtle found sounds (swirling water, knocking wood) fight with electro beats and warped vocal samples. 'Enclosure', the lead track, is a particularly optimistic take on this theme, harnessing big 1980s synthpop with the uneasy synth notes of Nine Inch Nail's downbeat moments, all with soaring vocals. Mills makes complexity sound simple.

TELL US MORE...

'The Embrace' isn't an isolated solo effort, though. With the kind of collaborators at her disposal, she'd be mad to not use them, and she worked on the EP with producer/engineer TJ Allen (Portishead, Bat For Lashes, Hannah Peel), while Goldfrapp's Will Gregory plays synths on 'Fragile Creature'. Alex Thomas, drummer with acts as diverse as Bolt Thrower, John Cale and Air, adds live drums on several tracks.

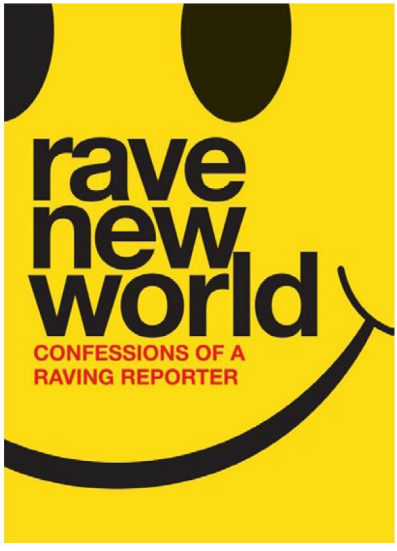
JAMES THORNHILL

'The Embrace' EP is released via Bandcamp on 19 May

FIELD REPORTER

Rave from the frontline

Author Kirk Field worked as a barman at the M25 Orbital raves, getting a close-up view of the glorious moment acid house exploded. Tired of the anti-party lies spouted by the media, Field would become a "raving reporter" for the clubbers' bible Mixmag, sending "sweat-soaked dispatches" from dancefloors the world over. Safe to say, there is never a dull moment in his new memoir. 'Rave New World: Confessions Of A Raving Reporter', Field's uncensored first-person account of 1990s hedonism, is packed to the eyeballs with vivid anecdotes and a five-star cast list which includes Diego Maradona, Timothy Leary, The KLF, Boris Yeltsin, Boy George, Saddam Hussein's wife, the CIA, the KGB and even Her Majesty The Queen. Order a copy now for £12.99. **kirkfield.net**



RESISTANCE RADIO

Ukraine station sets up shop

In fighting a just war of self-defence, Ukraine is engaging in cultural retaliation on several fronts. Ukraine Resistance Radio's aim is to commandeer the airwaves to "amplify the experimental sounds and music of Ukrainian artists and their collaborations" and send "signals of Ukrainian expression".

The first stage of the project has been an open call for submissions – one track per artist, seven minutes max, with a focus on "surprising and experimental music, field recordings, noise, DIY electronics and other sonic inventions that are often at the edges or unheard". Selected cuts were played on URR's show on Radio Vilnius on 19 March, which is available to stream from the station's website, with more episodes to follow. **radiovilnius.live**

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Richard Anthony Hewson, who lent his initials to The RAH Band, enjoyed chart success with space-age stomper 'The Crunch' in 1977 and 'Clouds Across The Moon' in 1985. He shares some of his inspirations on the road to success

INTERVIEW: BOB FISCHER

HERBIE HANCOCK

"I came to music relatively late in life. I left school and immediately ran away to join the Merchant Navy. But the previous occupant had left a guitar in my cabin, and I used to sit on the deck practising. I listened to Voice Of America on shortwave radio, and I really got into jazz. So when I got ashore, I started playing gigs around London, and I was offered a scholarship to the Guildhall to study composition. In 1966, halfway through my course, my jazz teacher got a job working with Herbie Hancock, but couldn't do it. He said, 'Richard, I'm going to plunge you in at the deep end'.

"Herbie was recording the score for the film 'Blow-Up'. I said, 'You're joking, I can't work with him – he's far too good!'. I'd followed his career with Miles Davis, and I'd even seen him play live. But I was sent down to give him a hand with orchestration, and when I met him, he was lovely. Suddenly there he was, playing his stuff in front of me. We did the soundtrack, he was amazing, and meeting my hero like that had an incredible effect on me."

PAUL MCCARTNEY'S CIMBALOM

"I formed a little band with Peter Asher, whose sister was Jane Asher – and, of course, she was going out with Paul McCartney. I ran into Paul while we were rehearsing at Peter's house, and he wanted an orchestral arranger for a new artist he was working with – Mary Hopkin, singing 'Those Were The Days'. I said, 'I don't know anything about pop music!'. But Paul gave me the gig, and he didn't put any pressure on me. The only thing he wanted was a Hungarian instrument called a cimbalom, which you can hear at the beginning of the song.

"So we recorded my arrangement at Trident Studios, and Paul McCartney and Mary Hopkin hated it. *Hated* it. I thought, 'Oh well, never mind!'. But when they took it over to Abbey Road and listened to it again, apparently Paul said,

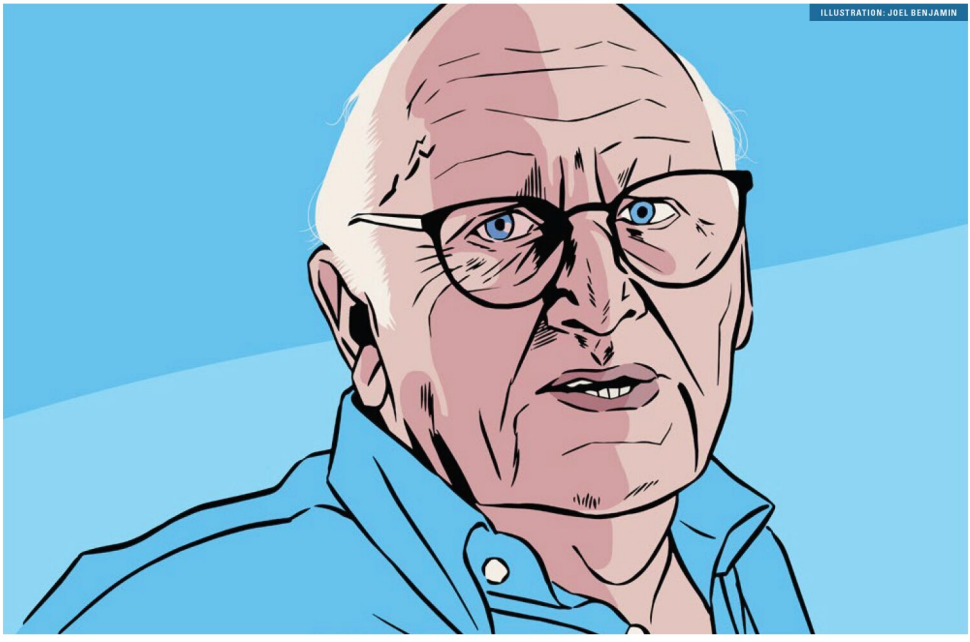


ILLUSTRATION: JOEL BENJAMIN

'My God, it's not horrible at all, it's *brilliant*'. It went straight to Number One in 1968, on the day I got married. And that song opened the door for me to do orchestral arrangements for big artists all over the world."

GIORGIO MORODER

"I loved arranging and conducting orchestras, but it was always for other people's songs. So I came up with the idea of making my own pop record, playing what I could, which was keyboards and guitar. I made 'The Crunch' by putting everything through guitar pedals, and people said, 'That's a brilliant synth sound!'. But there isn't a synthesiser on it. I didn't have one. When Roland found out about this, they kindly gave me an SH-5 and a sequencer.

"Then I heard Giorgio Moroder and Donna Summer doing 'I Feel Love' and thought, 'That's the same bloody synth they gave me!'. It sounded fantastic. So that's what started me off making electronic music, and I went to town with the SH-5. It completely changed the way I work."

CLIFF AND ALBERT

"I was busy with The RAH Band, but people kept asking me to do arrangements, which was great. I just love big orchestras, they're so powerful when you're standing in front of them. And in 1982, Cliff Richard asked me to arrange and conduct the London Philharmonic for a show at the Royal Albert Hall! Can you imagine me standing on that podium? Oh my god, I was really scared.

"I walked out onto the stage, a spotlight came down and everyone started clapping. I thought, 'Who's come on?'. Then I realised it was me. And it was a blast. Orchestras still call themselves 'the band', and 'the band' were bloody amazing that night. Incredible. It never happened again – but I don't mind, I've done it once in my life."

THE INTERNATIONAL OPERATOR

"I'd been chugging away with The RAH Band, and I'd written a song that didn't have a lyric. I was in Hollywood, doing arrangements for Supertramp, and was phoning home through what was called the international operator, who would answer the phone and ask who you wanted to be connected to. And I thought, 'Right… how about a song set in the future, where she's the *intergalactic* operator?'. That became 'Clouds Across The Moon'.

"I didn't have anyone to sing it, so I asked my wife, Liz, who's a brilliant pianist. She wasn't a singer, but she sang the song with this nice naive quality that really suited the story of a woman trying to connect to her husband on Mars. She was very convincing, so we left it as it is, and the rest is history."

THE TIKTOK GENERATION

"Last year, a song I wrote in 1982 – 'Messages From The Stars' – was picked up by some young influencers on TikTok, who started sharing it. And it blew up! It's had something like 50 million streams. They probably don't even realise it was written 40 years ago, but it's sky-rocketed and that's something I never expected. Kids are speeding it up, slowing it down and making their own versions. You can promote things all you like, but you can never achieve what they do just by word of mouth. It's amazing.

"My son, Daniel, played a concert at the Jazz Cafe last summer, arranging all The RAH Band stuff for his own group. I cued in the samples for them and said a few words – the first time I'd performed live as The RAH Band for 45 years. 'Messages From The Stars' went down a storm. So he can do a live RAH Band tour now! He's a really hot musician. We call him 'Son Of Rah'."

'Messages From The Stars – The RAH Band Story Volume One' is out now on Cherry Pop

WHO'S GOT A ZIGGY?

Evergreen Bowie series gets fourth volume

Simon Goddard's acclaimed book series, 'Bowie Odyssey', is the most detailed guide to the pop star's life and career in the 1970s. Promising a volume per year, Omnibus Press have now unveiled the fourth instalment, 'Bowie Odyssey 73', which catches up with David Bowie as he contends with the new heights of fame, while existential threats for glam rock – and Ziggy Stardust – loom large.

"More lovers than he can count on one hand, more appetites than he can satisfy with one nose and still more success," teases the publisher, "but at what cost?" £20 is the answer. **omnibuspress.com**

FISCHY TALES

ES contributor announces drama company

"As a child in the 1970s, I was obsessed with the telly and often fantasised about the presenters speaking to me personally through the crackly speakers of our rented TV set…"

Do we even need to tell you who's speaking? Of course, it's ES contributor Bob Fischer, who recently announced Mulgrave Audio, a new original audio drama company set up with fellow North East writers Andrew Orton and Andrew T Smith. Their first release, titled 'Simon Perkins' Lurgy', follows a teenager in September 1974 as he grows increasingly convinced the daytime TV continuity announcer is talking to him. Fischer has recruited BBC Radiophonic Workshop veteran Roger Limb and Castles In Space favourite The Twelve Hour Foundation on soundtracking duties. Don't miss this one. **mulgraveaudio.co.uk**

TIME MACHINE

Duran Duran man **Nick Rhodes** recalls the launch of his 1984 book and subsequent London exhibition, 'Interference', which were brought to life by eminent graphic designer Malcolm Garrett

WORDS: MAT SMITH

On Christmas Eve 1984, Hamiltons Gallery in London's Mayfair hosted a private view of 'Interference', an exhibition by Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes. The gallery extravaganza followed a book of the same name, a joint project with the band's trusted design collaborator Malcolm Garrett, which had been published earlier that year. Visually arresting, the book presented a selection of Polaroid photographs taken by Rhodes in American hotel bedrooms while Duran Duran were on a 1983 tour to promote their second album, 'Rio'.

"Things had taken a turn for the hysterical," recalls Rhodes. "We were prisoners over many weeks, not able to go out anywhere because our hotels were surrounded by fans, so a lot of the time I was watching TV in my room."

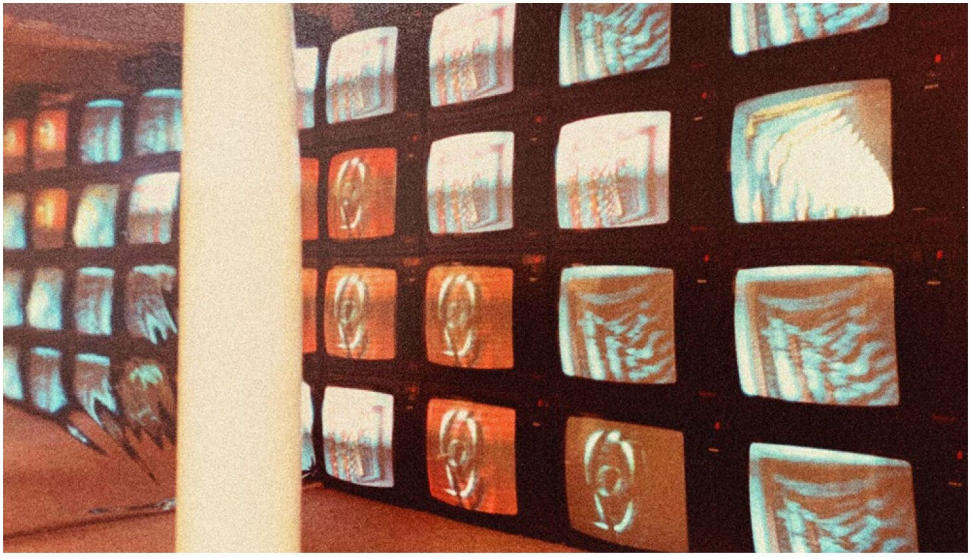
While idly flicking through seemingly endless channels of obscure cable TV shows, Rhodes alighted upon something that held his attention.

"One day, the screen was filled with interference," he says. "I'd never seen anything like it. The colours kept changing, depending on the image underneath it, so I got my Polaroid SX-70 and took a picture of the screen. I became obsessed with finding these images on the TV. At the end of that tour, I had boxes of strangely exquisite and distorted Polaroid photos. I didn't quite know what to do with them, but thought it'd be nice to make a book."

Duran Duran finished the 'Rio' tour and were ushered into the studio to record what became 'Seven And The Ragged Tiger', ending up at EMI's 301 Studios in Sydney in the autumn of 1983 to complete the album. They were joined there by Garrett, primarily to discuss sleeve options, but he and Rhodes also began designing what became the 'Interference' book.

"Every day, I'd go over to the apartment where Nick was staying," recalls Garrett. "We'd spend a couple of hours looking at all the Polaroids, deciding which ones we wanted to use, and how they would be collated. And then at 4pm, he'd take a cab to the studio, work on the new album until the middle of the night, and then we'd go through the same process again the next day."

The resulting book was, in Garrett's words, "disarmingly pretentious", fusing together the obscure Polaroids with elaborate designs and a series of titles by Rhodes that veered toward the ridiculous – 'Dialling My Second Life', 'Vertigo In Children' and 'The Result Of Rebuilding A Maze', to name just three.



"We decided that instead of simply putting the Polaroids on a page with a title, we'd let Malcolm explore his graphic lexicon and be as creative as he wanted," says Rhodes. "He got more and more crazy with the layouts, taking elements of photos, repeating and breaking them up, and using symbols and different graphics and colours. For me, it really became a time capsule.

"And then I said, 'Well, let's bring them to life in an exhibition. But instead of it being a few walls filled with Polaroids, why don't we do something different?'. So I started coming up with all these ideas of how to present it. And again, Malcolm was very involved with that process."

It was Garrett's job to turn Rhodes' ambitious ideas for the exhibition into something real, bringing together a team of contributors to work on specific aspects. Sarah Gregory, the wife of Heaven 17's Glenn Gregory, was invited to paint a canvas version of one of the Polaroids, as were Garrett's design contemporaries Jill Mumford and Caryn Gough.

Massive inkjet banners were printed in Lancashire and draped like medieval tapestries from the ceiling, carpets were made using the Polaroid images, a series of painted light boxes were placed around the gallery, and a TV was placed underneath Perspex stairs leading down to the main room. It was an immersive art experience before immersive art experiences became commonplace.

"One of the Polaroids has a yellow brick road in it," remembers Rhodes. "So we built one through the entire gallery, and that led to a volcano. There was a volcano in the Polaroid, and I wanted to display my tiny photograph next to what turned out to be this 12-foot-high structure. We actually managed to have lava coming out of it. The whole project was disorienting and very conceptual."

In a corridor connecting two gallery rooms, Garrett and Roger Cleghorn installed a huge video wall consisting of 60 Thorn EMI televisions and six VCRs, wired so that the same image would appear on 10, seemingly random, screens simultaneously.

"They were specifically EMI because Duran Duran were signed to EMI," explains Cleghorn, one of the designers at Garrett's Assorted iMaGes studio.

He and Garrett had worked together as experimental electronic music duo The Pathfinders. They had also shared an apartment while Cleghorn was studying for his MA at Chelsea School of Art, where he had developed the idea of "sound painting" – electronic sounds fed into VCR inputs to produce unpredictable shapes on screen.

"The sound paintings fitted in with the idea of 'Interference' and the cable TV images in Nick's photos," says Cleghorn. "We duplicated VHS cassettes containing an hour-long edit of my sound paintings, and then between each piece we would dissolve to one of Nick's Polaroids or the 'Interference' logo and hold that for a minute or longer.

"We'd start each VCR and wait a few seconds before pressing play on the next one. It meant that one group of TVs would always be showing the same thing, and any image that held on screen would eventually be on all of the screens at the same time, before starting to change. It was very lo-tech, but it looked good."

While forward-thinking and adventurous, Rhodes believes that the Hamiltons exhibition was "too surreal" for most visitors. Garrett also recalls that a lot of people were confused by 'Interference' at the time.

"They either dismissed it or have forgotten it," he reflects. "It wasn't taken seriously. The art world was quite ready to dismiss Nick as this musical interloper. How dare he pretend that he was some kind of artist?"

Undeterred by the quizzical reaction to 'Interference', Rhodes has gone on to produce other art projects and has a new book to support another exhibition, 'Ghosts Of Peonies', scheduled for publication later in 2023.

"I've always liked making things, and I've always thought of Duran Duran as being very handmade," concludes Rhodes. "If you like to make things, whatever they are, there are always going to be crossovers, like making music and art. I think there should always be space for new ideas, and I feel that's what we created with 'Interference'."

Nick Rhodes is currently on tour with Duran Duran.
For more, visit duranduran.com

NIM CHIMPSKY

Dreamy filmic tones from Kolkata

WHO?

Nim Chimpsky is the sonic costume of Aniket Dutta, an award-winning filmmaker hailing from Kolkata, India. His music career began in earnest after the international tour of his debut feature film ('Ghost Of The Golden Groves', witten and directed with Roshni Sen) was catastrophically cut short due to the pandemic. With Dutta housebound for the foreseeable, he found an escape from creative inertia through the discovery of an old Tascam Portastudio. And we are all the better for it.

WHY NIM CHIMPSKY?

Dutta's music wrestles with the mystical shadow of daily life, and does so with sumptuous feeling. "Exploring dreams and dream-like memories is a way for me to depict this time we are living in," he divulges. "During the pandemic, perhaps due to complete isolation and an uncanny quiet, I had a very real experience of being part of a lucid dream. This is when I started fiddling around with the tape machine." The fruits of this musical period arrived at the end of 2022, with Dutta's haunting debut 'Feels Like 43°' providing a heady storm of downbeat electro and ambient environmentalism, nestling somewhere between Boards Of Canada and Angelo Badamenti's crepuscular 'Twin Peaks' soundtrack. 'Byebike' is one of the most stunningly beautiful tracks you'll hear this week – maybe month, perhaps even year – existing in a hazy cross-section between an Andrew Wasylyk dark jazz jaunt and the neon ketamine of vaporwave.

TELL US MORE...

'Ghost Of The Golden Groves' is a trippy black and white horror sci-fi story about inexplicable malevolent forces occupying the Sonajhuri forest in rural Bengal. It won the top award at the Chicago Underground Film Festival, and Dutta is currently working on a new feature film project. A UK label has already cottoned on to his burgeoning music career, and he's planning to release more music very soon.

ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

'Feels Like 43°' is out now on Bandcamp

COME TO DADA

Polish festival hires AI as artistic director

Warsaw's Unsound has built quite the reputation for its forward-thinking programme and brilliantly bonkers ideas – the latest being their 2023 Dada theme, which will include an Artificially Intelligent Artistic Director (AIAD) as a member of the festival's curatorial team.

"As an AI, I am able to process and analyse large amounts of data quickly and accurately," says the Unsound AIAD. "I am excited to use my abilities to assist the team in creating a festival programme that is both relevant and thought-provoking, and that reflects the spirit of the Dada movement."

An outlandish idea that would have made even Dada founder Hugo Ball blush, the festival takes place in October, so you have enough time to get used to the idea. **unsound.pl**

BITS AND PIECES

Synthesis evolution ahoy

French developers Kodamo have unveiled their latest offering, the MASK1 "Bitmask" synthesiser. As a very pretty-looking instrument in an off-white finish, it boasts a clean design with a sparsely populated control panel, and a five-octave FATAR keyboard. So what's a "Bitmask" synthesiser? Glad you asked. Kodamo's proprietary synthesis engine was developed with a view to applying the computing method of "bitmasking" (where a number is altered by having some of its digits "masked") to digital synthesis. The results are some very complex wave shapes based on much more simple waveforms, where even the humble sine wave can provide the basis for a vast variety of timbres. With two Bitmask oscillators per voice, built-in effects, an onboard looper and more, €2,259 is money well-spent. **kodamo.org**

Music for Stowaways

The first reissue of seminal early 1980's electronic recordings
from the **British Electric Foundation (B.E.F.)**,
aka **HEANEN 17** / ex-**THE HUMAN LEAGUE**'s
Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh,
with Adi Newton (**CLOCK DVA / THE FUTURE**),
and John Wilson (**HEAVEN 17**),
originally a cassette-only release (1981).

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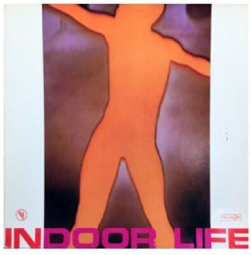
ENIGMAS

Sweeping through the forgotten corridors of sound, **Scott Blixen** sets his sights on **Indoor Life**



When I first heard 'Archeology', from Indoor Life's self-titled 1980 EP, I was both enraptured and a bit miffed. Why had this nugget been entombed in obscurity for over 30 years? As the lyrics describe being buried in cement awaiting future discovery, the song holds a premonition of the group's destiny. Their latter-day exhumation reveals a web of surprising connections and two vital records that were never released in the UK.

As a post-punk ensemble operating in New York and San Francisco, Indoor Life enjoyed underground success. With roots in avant-garde art practice, they're often associated with Tuxedomoon, although their skewed grooves and spatial dub textures show equal kinship with A Certain Ratio.

While the trombone hasn't played a major role in alternative pop, it took the lead in Indoor Life's early music. Composer and sound designer JA Deane warped the instrument beyond recognition and passed it through synths, achieving a sound similar to the treated trumpet of Jon Hassell, who he later worked with.

The queasy and uneasy groove of 'Voodoo', from Indoor Life's 1981 debut album (also self-titled), unfolds over 13 minutes of slo-mo abstraction. 'Gilmore Of The Fillmore' is propelled by sounds of uncertain origin that admirers of Wire's '154' will appreciate. Singer Jorge Socarras' unfettered and emotive style may jolt complacent listeners with its repeated phrases and shifts into other languages that subvert easy interpretation.

Given that British listeners were unaware of Indoor Life, virtually no one heard Socarras' pre-emptive work for decades. In San Francisco, he'd met Patrick Cowley, a student of the City College Electronic Music Department, and they recorded from 1976 to 1979 under the name Catholic, before Cowley became a trailblazing architect of electro-disco. In 1979, they completed an album, using Cowley's expanded technological palette, which remained unreleased for the next 30 years.

As a duo using voice, synths and drum machines, Catholic form part of the hidden history of 70s electronic music, with Suicide their only contemporaries. If Indoor Life's early recordings seemed like a continuation of Catholic, it's hardly surprising as Cowley produced all the group's work. He tragically died of AIDS in 1982, and Socarras would later cofound the Silence = Death Collective in response to the epidemic.

Indoor Life's second album (again self-titled, confusingly), released in 1983, reined in the abstract angularity, reflecting a broader cultural sea change as much as the loss of Cowley's talent. Nevertheless, it richly deserved to reach the shores of Blighty.

On 'Archeology', Socarras implores us to "dig and dig and dig" before pneumatic drills set him free. Belatedly, searchers of lost music heeded his subterranean call.

LANDMARKS

Singer and poet **Anne Clark** outlines the making of 'Sleeper In Metropolis', her defining 1985 synthpop cut with producer David Harrow

INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS

"I've been writing poetry for as long as I can remember. At infant and junior school I got through one exercise book after another. Home life was very difficult, with little or no room to be seen or heard, and writing became an alternative way to find a voice.

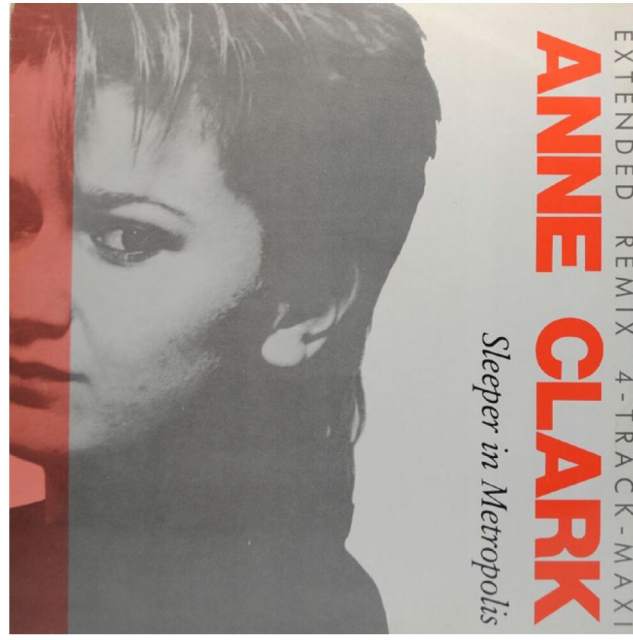
"Growing up, I remember Charles Causley's poem 'The Song Of The Dying Gunner' made a huge impact on a classroom that had no interest whatsoever in poetry. We were all stunned into silence by the language. It made me realise the power and magic of words. During my teenage years, the poetry of singer/songwriters like Simon & Garfunkel and Tim Buckley made a big impression. Then the lyrical musicality of Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath. Discovering David Bowie, then Patti Smith – they weren't just a revelation but a revolution. Laurie Anderson, Maya Angelou, Rainer Maria Rilke…

"Performing my poetry seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. For me, music sets a scene for the images of spoken words. Initially I created 'soundscapes' to make settings for my texts. Very basic musical structures, blended with recordings I'd made out in the streets, parks or at home, using a mic and tape recorder.

"I lived and breathed music of every kind – Cat Stevens, Tangerine Dream, Chopin, Cockney Rebel, Donna Summer, Nico, X-Ray Spex, Kraftwerk, Buzzcocks, Magazine, The Durutti Column…

"In the late 1970s, punk created so many opportunities. In south London, where I was from, there was this constant well of creativity and innovation springing up in every pub, or on every street corner. Many of the bands from the area became synonymous with the punk movement – The Damned, Siouxsie And The Banshees, Generation X…

"I'd gone to school with Kirsty MacColl, and I remember we put a band together for just one night. Pubs had bands on every night! That kind of energy and creativity is unthinkable now. I worked in a record shop around



the corner from Croydon's Warehouse Theatre. I was constantly knocking on their door suggesting that they incorporate some of this new 'punk' creativity into their schedule. They were very reluctant at first, but eventually offered me the opportunity to hold a couple of trial evenings there on Sundays. They were a great success and sold out, so they offered me the chance to host these events on a regular basis. We brought in full audiences every weekend, with acts like Depeche Mode, John Cooper Clarke and Paul Weller.

"While curating these evenings, I met David Harrow. I'm not sure why we decided to work together because we're really different personalities, yet there was a very powerful, explosive and brief creative energy that came into being between us, enabling us to formulate pieces like 'Sleeper In Metropolis'. This was still the good old analogue days, so a Juno-60 was at the centre of David's creative toolbox. Digital technology was coming in – the Yamaha DX7 played a big role as did Roland 808 and LinnDrum machines.

"Initially, all our best ideas were formulated at David's home studio in Banstead, in Surrey. After the release and relative success of my first mini-album, 'The Sitting Room', the label put up some money for David and I to record at a bigger, better equipped studio than the little 8-track place I'd used in North London. Denmark Street in the West End was actually a very unfriendly, macho place, where it was made obvious that a woman could have no say or constructive role in the creative process. Looking back on it now, it was a pretty disgusting situation.

"The sessions were long – sometimes up to 12 or 14 hours – and expensive. Especially when you think about what's possible in a home studio now, for little or no cost. Those were different times.

"Growing up in a small end-of-terrace house in East Croydon, I gradually became aware of a monstrous construction being built literally right outside my window, blocking out even the tiniest hint of sunlight. Having spent my childhood in a seemingly blissful suburbia made up of hedges, trees and birdsong, the high-security monster that was the IBM Building felt like something from another planet, taking over everything. It was this that mostly inspired the lyrics to 'Sleeper In Metropolis'.

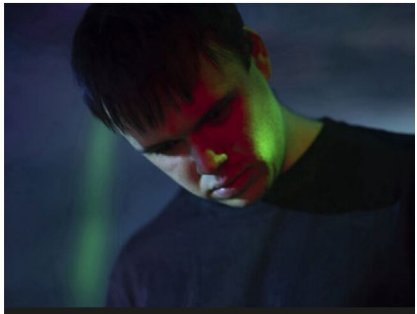
"We were first aware of the popularity of the track via messages coming across from Berlin, and it just grew. It was a hit around the world – except the UK, of course – and then in Chicago, it found its place in the burgeoning underground scene there. The success of 'Sleeper' earned the record companies loads of money! I've been fighting for the royalties ever since, but it did open up a lot of doors for me with regards to touring and so on.

"Red Flame Records – who initially released the song – got taken over by Virgin, and I subsequently got a recording deal from that. The song was definitely meant to invigorate people, both the words and music. If people wanted to dance as well, that was absolutely fine.

"The clubs in Germany and mainland Europe in general were hungry for a remix. It was being played in clubs, and on radio and TV. It's since been remixed and plagiarised countless times. 'Sleeper In Metropolis' is still in my sets. It would be pretty difficult to get away without playing it live! However, as with everything, it's had to evolve and change with age and circumstance, so it's done in many different ways to keep it sounding fresh and interesting for the audience, the musicians and myself.

"I would never be presumptuous enough to assume that David's and my tracks could be viewed as so innovative, but I must concede that we did create a couple of pretty exceptional numbers. When we were writing and recording, we were aware of a very special energy."

Anne Clark will tour mainland Europe from 31 May. For more, visit anneclarkofficial.com



JORDAN STANLEY

Rave tapes from Auld Reekie

WHO?

Jordan Stanley is an experimental composer from Edinburgh and a producer with fingers in many Scottish pies. 'A Cry For The Moon' is his second album of pristine techno head-nodders and sees him move from cool London cassette label Salmon Universe to equally cool Dorset cassette label Bytes.

WHY JORDAN STANLEY?

His luminous banging beats warrant comparisons with Rustie, Hudson Mohawke and Italian synth-whisperer Lorenzo Senni, as 'A Cry For The Moon' veers from wonky synth jams to effervescent broken rave. The highlight, 'Pure Morning', is a 4am techno boogie deluged with crepuscular scratches and cheekily hooting melodies. Look out for unintentional guest stars Charli XCX and Ariana Grande, thanks to Stanley's devotion to highly tweaked sampling. "Many of the synth chords are made up of minuscule samples of existing songs which have been warped to the point that they are virtually unrecognisable," he explains.

TELL US MORE...

Jordan Russell-Hall, for that is his real name, has true musical pedigree. He's strummed the guitar for boisterous Scottish folk band The Youth And Young, twiddled knobs for Britney Spears-covering trip hopper Dahlia, and tapped the glockenspiel for Glasgow's "nostalgic synth miserablists" Dead Modern. But until now, Jordan Stanley was perhaps best-known for his ambient guise stanleystanley, which is a bit like Duran Duran being called, er, duranduran. His debut album as Jordan Stanley was 'Empty For Hundred', named after the Yamaha MT400 cassette recorder through which he dissected his music. Its follow-up, 'A Cry For The Moon', arrived hot on the heels of his first live performance supporting Joe Oxley's psych rock outfit TVAM. If TVAM's rise to critical acclaim is anything to go by, this Edinburgher and his hooting melodies will be around for some time.

FAT ROLAND

'A Cry For The Moon' is out now on Bytes

IN RECORD TIME

Upcycling extremist tackles vinyl

"Ever since I can remember, I have been taking things apart, trying to figure out what makes them tick," says Etsy user Pixelthis. In 2007, they quit their job and started making clocks out of old stuff – "I have seen the inside of more dumpsters than I could have ever imagined!" – including these excellent turntable clocks. Costing anything between £30 and £150, depending on whether you want just a vinyl base or a full-blown turntable, these recycled clocks are ready to be hung on walls, and the record is replaceable with one of your choosing. So when life is getting a bit too hectic for your liking, simply switch the speed to 33⅓ and relax (we take no responsibility if that doesn't come true). **etsy.com/shop/pixelthis**

FESTIVAL SEASON

Stroud weekender ticks boxes

The Hidden Notes festival is back and will be taking place in Stroud across the weekend of 23-24 September, with churches, art centres, galleries and record shops transformed into ad hoc venues. Headlining the festival this year will be Hannah Peel and renowned Japanese composer/percussionist Midori Takada. Elsewhere there'll be sets by French producer Akusmi, experimental electronic group Manchester Collective and the NYX drone choir. Look out for film screenings (Delia Derbyshire film ahoy!) and Particle Shrine, a generative art installation in which cosmic ray outputs are "controlled in real time by five cosmic ray detectors inside the installation, as well as by live readings from a neutrino observatory in Japan". Cool. **hiddennotes.co.uk**

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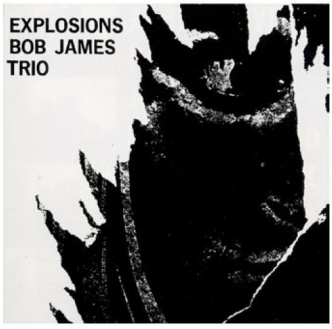
SCHOOL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Resident archivist **Jack Dangers** pulls out a record by **Bob James Trio**, which resides in the slender Venn slice where electronic music and jazz co-exist



Bob James is a piano player who's been sampled almost as much as James Brown. His best-known tune is probably 'Angela', which was the theme for the TV show 'Taxi'. Mind you, his albums 'One' and 'Two', which were released in 1974 and 1975, have been sampled to death. The really big piece is from an amazing track from 'One' called 'Nautilus'. It's been used by so many people, from Run-DMC to Mary J Blige, Wu-Tang Clan, Björk, me… I re-used it on the new Meat Beat record.

But the record I pulled out this month is his second album, 'Explosions', released in 1965 on a label called ESP Disk under the name Bob James Trio. I came to this album mainly because Gordon Mumma is on it, plus I collect a lot of the records from the ESP Disk label. They put out the first Fugs record and albums by Pharoah Sanders, Albert Ayler and Timothy Leary. They always did interesting black and white covers too.

Along with Gordon Mumma, Robert Ashley, another electronic music pioneer, is also credited on 'Explosions'. Both are big names in the electronic/contemporary avant-garde music scene, but I think this album might be the first time they appeared on record.

Robert Ashley founded the Ann Arbor Cooperative Studio for Electronic Music with Gordon Mumma in 1958, and they toured together throughout the 1960s. Ashley went on to become director of the San Francisco Tape Music Center in 1969, and he was later married to Mimi Johnson, whose label Lovely Music, Ltd released 'Vernal Equinox' by Jon Hassell and most of her husband's music.

Gordon Mumma collaborated with John Cage and Merce Cunningham's dance company in the late 1960s and early 70s. His first album, 'Dresden / Venezia / Megaton' from 1979, was one of Lovely Music's early releases. He was known for his "cybersonic" circuits, which he used these to manipulate sound in live performances.

'Explosions' is the first Bob James album to incorporate electronics and tape manipulations – it's like musique concrète. Gordon Mumma is credited on the first track, 'Peasant Boy', and Robert Ashley is on the second, 'Untitled Mixes'. Both pieces are pretty avant-garde with some extreme sounds in there, and it was probably the first time jazz and electronic music were combined on record.

Bob James is 83 now, and he's still touring and recording.

STORYVILLE

No wave pioneer pens hard-hitting memoir

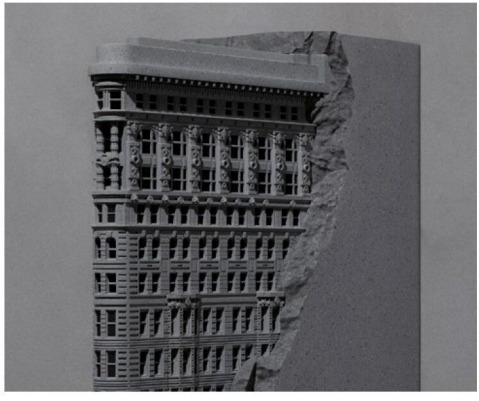
Adele Bertei was a key figure in the late 1970s New York no wave scene, playing in The Contortions – who were produced by Brian Eno on 'No New York' – and founding the first openly gay all-girl punk band, The Bloods. Bertei would later work with luminaries like Tears For Fears, Thomas Dolby, Scritti Politti and Whitney Houston, but her success didn't come easy.

Published by ZE, 'Twist: An American Girl' is Bertei's frank and frankly harrowing coming-of-age memoir, which maps out her stormy adolescence with a schizophrenic mother and an abusive father that led to time spent in the US care system. Her escape was art. Lydia Lunch says Bertei finds "a perverse beauty in the devastating landscape of the American traumazone", and she's not far off. Order it now for £20. **zebooks.com**

BUILT LIKE A BRICK HOUSE

The speaker that's also a skyscraper

Better known for expensive garments seen at London Fashion Week, Japanese fashion designer Takahiro Miyashita recently turned his attention to the world of hi-fi, albeit in a slightly unique way, with this floor speaker inspired by New York City's iconic 22-storey Flatiron Building on Fifth Avenue. Why? Well, you might say why not, but we suspect the answer to that may be hidden in the $6,791 price tag. **the-soloist.net**



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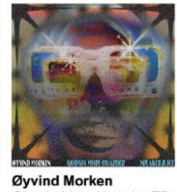
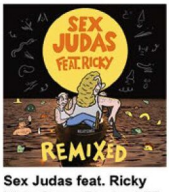
Øyvind Morken
Homansbyen Express EP



Øyvind Morken
Giorgio More Hoarder EP



Sex Judas feat. Ricky
Night Songs Remixed EP

Ost & Kjex
Songs from the end
of the world LP

Wild Flowers
Reactivate LP

V/A
Snick Snack Vol. 1
Compilation

SCAN ME!

PULSE

QRTR

Sparkling dancefloor rhythms from Philly

WHO?

QRTR (pronounced "quarter") is the moniker of Philadelphia-based producer and DJ, Meagan Rodriguez, who makes brooding, dancefloor-friendly electronica that is riddled with otherworldly textures, thanks to an extensive film and field recording library. She first announced herself with a formidable brace of albums in as many years, with 2020's 'Drenched' and 2021's 'Infina Ad Nausea'. Combining electronica with jungle, techno and house, these paved the way for a string of high-profile sets at the likes of the Coachella and Night Of Fire festivals, where she appeared on bills alongside Arca, Eartheater and Kero Kero Bonito.

WHY QRTR?

It's the kind of dark and oblique electronica that cleverly works to evoke nostalgia and dystopia in equal measure. Shot through with the decaying soundscapes of Burial and Gaika, QRTR's music is more than willing to shift into the kind of pulsing techno we'd sooner associate with Orbital or LFO.

TELL US MORE...

Her latest EP, the seductively titled 'Music For Stealing To', is another impressive suite of tracks. From the Daniel Avery-like 'Again, But Colder', to the 303-infused Aphex Twin-isms of 'Roll Credits', the EP was created largely in response to the unease of moving from Brooklyn – Rodriguez' home of 10 years – to Philadephia, where an experimental scene is alive and popping. Rodriguez has described the three tracks as feeling "like the beginning, middle and end of a heist film", and hers is a story you'll want to watch until the credits.

WILLIAM STOKES

'Music For Stealing To' is out now on Headroom

LITTLE MAGIC ORCHESTRA

Sakamoto's Nokia catalogue compiled

Ryuichi Sakamoto's impact on the world of music might be even greater than you first anticipated. One diligent YouTuber recently compiled all of the ringtones the late Japanese composer wrote for the 2005 Nokia 8800 mobile phone. The breadth of sound is fairly staggering, with the 15-minute playlist promising acid bangers, catchy classical piano jaunts and lots more in between.

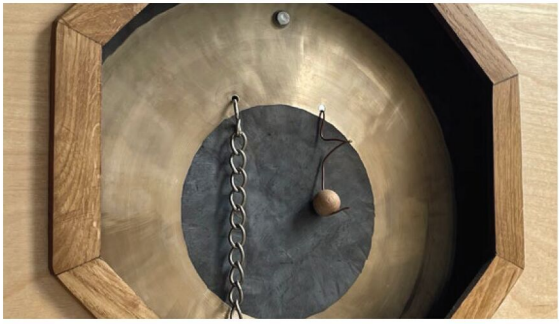
"I yearn for these to be released in lossless form on a CD someday (as well as tracks that did not make the cut), as these are wonderful pieces of music," says the YouTuber Tech Product Bangers. Well, who wants to ask Nokia first? **youtube.com/@TechProductBangers**

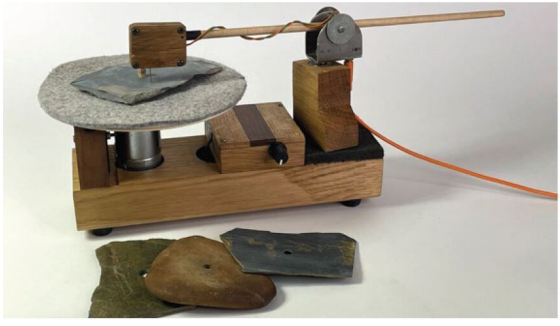
SNAKES ON A PLANE

New space exploration tech revealed

The NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (yes, that is a real department) has been working on a "snake-like robot" that can explore deep space in search of extraterrestrial life forms. Where holes and crevices might prove problematic for legs, human or otherwise, the idea with these snakes is that they can slither and traverse earth, water, sand, rock and ice.

The prototype, which goes by the catchy name of "exobiology extant life surveyor" or EELS (they really wanted that acronym), was prompted by the recent discovery of plumes of water vapour being ejected into space by Saturn's tiny ice moon, Enceladus. It was tested in British Columbia, where local residents reportedly said they'd "had it with these motherfucking snakes on these motherfucking plains". True story. **nasa.gov**





WHODUNNIT

Following in the footsteps of Harry Partch, Daphne Oram and Yuri Landman, innovative instrument builder **Jay Barsby**, founder of Dôrn Sound Objects, introduces some of his recent – and wackiest – works, which he describes as existing "in the space between sound art object and instrument"

WORDS: ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

GONG AMP

Inspired by the Métallique resonator on Maurice Martenot's landmark electronic instrument, the ondes Martenot, the Gong Amp features an integrated power amplifier which takes line level signals and amplifies them into an audio exciter attached to the tam tam, effectively transforming the gong into a speaker to create a particular tinny effect.

"This instrument is all about clanging harmonics and ghostly metallic resonances," says Jay Barsby. "Expect swooping sustained sounds and haunting echoes, and a new world of sonic possibilities."

KALIMBA PICKUP

When building this electrified version of a traditional Zimbabwean instrument, Barsby fixed two humbucker guitar pickups to either side of a configurable metal bridge with volume controls for each one. The resulting drone is like no other.

"Buzzing, fuzzy sustained notes when used with distortion or a beautiful wash of twinkling melodic notes with reverb and delay."

NEOLITHIC WHITE NOISE MACHINE

Arguably the most eye-catching of the lot, the Neolithic White Noise Machine is one for the ramblers among us, and Barsby got the idea after a trip to Cadair Idris, a mountain in North Wales, where he was making field recordings.

The NWNM recreates the sound of rocks underfoot, tapping into the repetitive rhythms that arise from walking up the mountain. Each piece of slate can be placed on the adjustable speed turntable which is in turn "played" by the stylus. So what does that sound like?

"The wind blows through the Welsh mountainside, the sound of shale beneath your boots, the rush of water as it cascades against the rocks."

NOT GUITAR

Featuring six strings with "guitar-style" tuners, a moveable bridge, and a metal block for attaching springs or other resonant object, the Not Guitar presents its player with a collection of innovative playing tools to mess around with. It connects with a key tenet of Barsby's philosophy:

"The Not Guitar will give tuneful plucks and strums or percussive piano-like hits, buzzing and droning, scratching and springing. Everyone can make noise on a Not Guitar. A guitarist friend of mine once asked, 'But how do you play it?'. I just replied, 'That's completely up to you, there are no rules'."

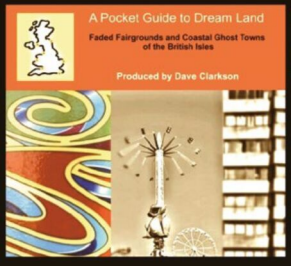
For more, visit dornsoundobjects.com

SH-EER BRILLIANCE

New instalment for legendary Roland series

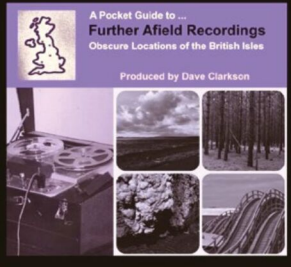
Roland has released a brand new addition to its lauded SH series for today's producer, and even though the SH-4d is a desktop groovebox disguised as a synthesiser, in reality it's much more than that. Offering an impressive 11 oscillator models, multi-timbral pattern sequencing, generous polyphony and numerous onboard effects, it promises to be something of a tabletop powerhouse, with not a little nod – as we know to expect from Roland by now – to the sounds of iconic Roland instruments of yore, like the Juno-106 and the SH-101. Something we might also have predicted from the Roland of 2023 is portability, and the SH-4d can run on a standard USB-C phone charger, or even AA batteries, for up to four hours. Put a beast in your backpack for £549. **roland.com**

'A Pocket Guide..' ltd ed digipak CDs from Dave Clarkson



A Pocket Guide to Dream Land: Faded Fairgrounds and Coastal Ghost Towns of the British Isles

'Spellbinding sonic postcards from a rapidly eroding seaside culture'
Mat Smith / Electronic Sound



A Pocket Guide to Further Afield Recordings: Obscure Locations of the British Isles

'Intriguing stuff...'
Stuart Maconie / BBC6 Music

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Recent album releases from Expert Sleepers

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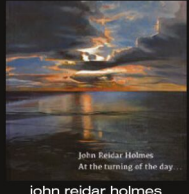
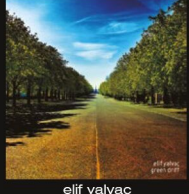
four drones for saxophone and modular synthesizer



john reidar holmes
at the turning of the day...

darkroom
fallout 4



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HOW BIZZARE

A new book, 'Conform To Deform', details the riotous story of **Some Bizzare**, one of the UK's greatest indie labels, and Stephen "Stevo" Pearce, its charismatic cult leader

WORDS: CARL GRIFFIN
PICTURES: PETER ASHWORTH

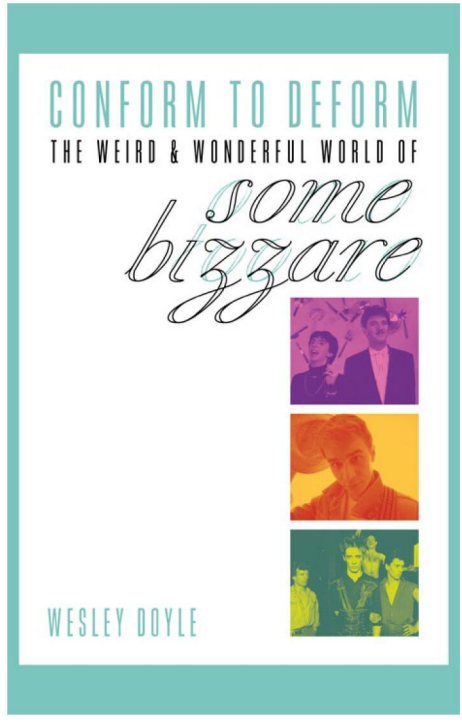
Among the few words my father ever spoke that I actually remember are those he fired at me after bursting into my bedroom, when I was aged 15, to demand that I turn down the music that was blaring out of my tinny Aiwa speakers.

"You'll never get anywhere in life listening to *that* sort of rubbish, son," he admonished.

My father wanted me to be either a policeman or a prison officer, and clearly thought I was on the wrong path. The "rubbish" in question was Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel and their 1984 'Hole' album, one of Jim Thirlwell's many Foetus-related releases, which I had been thoroughly enjoying, while not even remotely considering a future as a prison screw.

I bought 'Hole' after hearing a track on John Peel's seminal late-night BBC radio show. Talk about a gateway drug. The album was released on Some Bizzare, and the thrillingly transgressive, definitively alternative parallel world it lured me into was just the ticket for my scrambled and quietly rebellious teenage mind.

Home to a wonderfully diverse roster of outsider acts including Soft Cell, Blancmange, The The, Cabaret Voltaire, Coil, Swans and Psychic TV, the label was run by infamous music industry upsetter Stephen "Stevo" Pearce, a working class Dagenham lad who left school early without qualifications, yet reached the height of his considerable powers just a few years later.



Stevo's unconventional management style and business practices are set out, warts and all, in Wesley Doyle's new book, 'Conform To Deform'. Surprisingly, it's the first-ever full history of the label to appear in print. Surprising, because the stories inside are so ludicrously mad.

Doyle says he got himself hooked on Some Bizzare after watching Soft Cell cavorting live on Channel 4 music show 'Switch', with Clint Ruin (another of Jim Thirlwell's aliases) joyfully murdering Suicide's 'Ghost Rider'. The performance was duly cut short by the programme's unsettled producers, who ran the credits sharpish before things got too weird.

The music journalist's fascination with what he'd seen led him deep into the Some Bizzare wonderland, populated by all manner of freaks, rebels and musical revolutionaries, and brimming with delights for keen-eared listeners to revel in.

Along with imprints like Factory, Mute and 4AD, the more risque, London-based and Soho-centric Some Bizzare was at the seedier edge of alternative independent music in the starkly divided Thatcher and strife-dominated 1980s. And for a time at least, it even seemed at the pinnacle.

The imprint possessed a splintery vitality that even those previously mentioned indie champions lacked, and Doyle argues this was due in part to its founder's idealistic ambitions.

"Stevo didn't want to be an indie," says Doyle. "He wanted to get into bed with major labels and use their marketing and distribution clout. I really think he didn't see a difference between what was considered 'high art' and 'low art'.

"He absolutely believed that Einstürzende Neubauten had as much right to be on Virgin as The Human League. He wanted mainstream audiences to be exposed to their music, and then make up their own minds if they liked it or not."

Stevo's keen ear and extraordinary ability to spot talent and potential was easily equal to that of Factory's Tony Wilson or Mute's Daniel Miller, but the music was only half the story with Some Bizzare, with the individual tales of Stevo's dealings becoming equally legendary. It's claimed that he wasn't averse to suddenly withdrawing the rights to an album he had sold to a major record company in order to sell it to a different one.

According to Rusty Egan, the legendary Blitz DJ and ex-Visage drummer, Stevo was the kind of guy who would "throw petrol on a fire that he shouldn't have started in the first place", while a label head who preferred not to be named told Doyle, "When it comes to dealing with Stevo, life's just too short".

The history of Some Bizzare is a globetrotting tale, as compelling as it is terrifying, spanning ecstasy parties in New York, chaotic video shoots in the Peruvian jungle, high-concept multimedia happenings in disused tube stations, seedy Soho sex shows, platinum-selling hit singles, vice squad run-ins and, befitting the times and the label's preternatural feel for the zeitgeist, sex dwarves.

A big yarn alright, with Stevo front and centre. But the thing that swings it for this unconventionally written yet addictive narrative are the priceless contributions from key players, including Tim Pope, director of that notorious, tabloid-baiting, police raid-inducing Soft Cell video for 'Sex Dwarf'. Who, by the way, still doesn't see what all the fuss was about.

"Really, all that happens," asserts Pope, "is a lot of posturing, people rolling around in meat, me chucking handfuls of maggots… a dwarf jumping out of a crate with a bondage mask on, and everyone having a whole load of fun."

The actual meat of 'Conform To Deform' is all about what the people who were there at the time have to say about it. Quoted directly, without any interjection, interpretation or dot-joining third-person narrative from the author, we hear from the likes of Daniel Miller, Marc Almond and Dave Ball, Stephen Mallinder and The The's Matt Johnson, as well as from Stevo himself, who Doyle says was initially reluctant to take part, but then, true to character, "eventually tried to take over".

And what a joyful reminder of those explosively creative times this book is. Detailing a singular period which, in punk's iconoclastic wake, gave birth to such a broad range of new musical forms that still belie the sorely inadequate once-size-fits-all post-punk labelling. A new music that often had synths and drum machines (and sometimes scrap metal, chainsaws, or genuinely terrifying frontmen) at the centre of its sound.

But if all you really want to read about is sex dwarves, then shame on you…

'Conform To Deform: The Weird And Wonderful World Of Some Bizzare' is out now, published by Jawbone Press

STRUM ROLL PLEASE

Suzuki reissue the Omnichord

The quarry of many an eBay scourer, Suzuki's Omnichord is set to be reissued this Autumn in honour of the company's 70th anniversary. This retro-futuristic glissando machine, characterised by its metal harp sensor and chord buttons, was originally developed as a musical instrument for those with no prior musical ability.

It has since found its way onto a litany of hit recordings, however, with Damon Albarn shrewdly divulging in a recent interview that both the chords and rhythm of Gorillaz' breakout hit 'Clint Eastwood' actually came courtesy of the Omnichord's 'Rock #1' demo song. Few details on the reissue are available at the time of writing, but head to Suzuki's website to learn the history and keep up-to-date. **suzukimusic-global.com**

ARE YOU SITTING COMFORTABLY?

New book on BBC's musical innovators

It was 1957 when Daphne Oram, Desmond Briscoe and Dick Mills set up the BBC Radiophonic Workshop to experiment and innovate with sound for TV and radio. And the rest is history… but if you don't know your history (and detention for you dear ES reader, if you don't), this tome by William L Weir will sort you right out. Part of Bloomsbury's 33⅓ series, 'BBC Radiophonic Workshop: A Retrospective' takes a look back at the Workshop and its creative process, its influential body of work and how their ideas and techniques went on to inspire the likes of Pink Floyd and Aphex Twin. This is required reading – get it this month for £8.99. **bloomsbury.com**

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: **Nina Walsh** and **Niall Pearce**

Having weathered a Dorset winter and settled into the Cosmic Hutch, manoeuvres with Nina Walsh have reignited with our podcasts, her beautifully mushrooming book and now Woodleigh Research Facility's landmark EP, 'Apparently Solo Volume 1'.

Nina's Bandcamp releases have showcased her psychedelic folk side until recently, but for her long-standing studio partner Andrew Weatherall's 60th birthday, she's reached into her colossal Facility 4 archive to extract three roof-raising killers from 2017 in the "oompty boompty" style devotees crave.

Hard as an ancient rhino's helmet but lethally sinuous, 'SHLAP', 'Crack-Ed' and 'Mistress Ploppy' resonate with the devastating flow and lethal groove-weaving of one of her late collaborator's DJ sets, marinated in the telepathic spontaneous combustion that gripped their working together in his hyper-prolific final years.

"About a year before that fateful day, I said to Andrew, 'We've got all these tracks that need sub-category folders to put them in'," explains Nina. "I'd actually done it before he got to the studio, including folders for electro and ambient. Berlin Bum Dungeon was for panel-beating bangers that often came after he'd played some sweaty 'Berlin bum dungeon', as he called it – not necessarily in Berlin."

Already causing damage, 'SHLAP' deploys Motor City motifs, gonad-shrivelling circuit blasts and Erick Legrand's scything guitar over twisting, turning rhythms that never let up. 'Crack-Ed' maintains the euphoric pressure, riding an elastic gazelle loincloth riff enhanced by hippo bollock bass and cascading astral flatulence.

The Berlin basement influence rises like a crazed bison's boner on 'Mistress Ploppy's heavyweight industrial strength stomp – the title comes from Andrew's 'Blackadder'-derived nickname for Nina that he soon shortened to Plop ("Not very nice is it? It's like poo!").

While I'm talking about the family, Niall Pearce, the son of my lifelong Aylesbury friends Rick and Jude, has unfurled the sublimely atmospheric 'Steel Plate' EP on Nottingham's Reloaded Sounds under the curious moniker NN Sexless. There's probably some grime-like genre tag but the original is an eerie, sphincter-rattling dronescape punctuated with drum 'n' bass starbursts, hippo jockstrap lower frequencies and haunted female vocal.

Remixes come from Australia's Krypsis (who has released on Distorted Audio and Sapyens), adding nagging shuffle groove to its weightless float, while Suffolk grimester SDLR goes the turbo-Portaloo drum 'n' bass route. Most audaciously, Austria's Farr (from Vienna's Euphoria nights) shines with his evocative 'Re-Whip', creating its spiky midnight gutter trawl. There really is something going on here.

'Apparently Solo Volume 1' and 'Steel Plate' are both available now via Bandcamp

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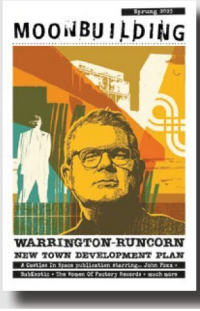

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PHOTO: TOM SHEEHAN

ELECTRIC STORM

Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh formed British Electric Foundation within weeks of their departure from The Human League in 1980, bringing out their debut album soon afterwards. Inspired by Sony's revolutionary new portable tape player and initially only available as a limited edition cassette, 'Music For Stowaways' remains one of the most innovative and important electronic albums of all time. And the story of how it all came together has some pretty incredible twists and turns...

WORDS: NEIL MASON

Whatever you might think you know about the break-up of The Human League Mk 1, the reality was so much worse. In his recently published autobiography, 'Electronically Yours Vol 1', Martyn Ware spells out the full horror.

He arrived at The Human League's Sheffield HQ one October morning in 1980 for what Bob Last, their manager and the Fast Product label boss, called a "strategic band meeting". A stickler for punctuality, Martyn was early and was surprised to find that bandmates Philip Oakey, Ian Craig Marsh and Adrian Wright had all got there before him.

"Strange, but I thought nothing of it at the time," he writes.

He then lays out the conversation that followed the way he remembers it.

Bob: "Sit down Martyn, we have something to tell you."

Martyn: "Huh?"

Bob: "We want you to leave the group."

Martyn: "What are you talking about? What's happening?"

Bob: "We think it's for the best."

Martyn: "You can't throw me out of The Human League, it's my group!"

Bob: "We'll compensate you for giving us the name."

Martyn: "I'm keeping the name. I'll see you in court. Phil, Ian, what is going on? Did you know about this?"

They'd been plotting to kick him out of the band for months. Everybody knew apart from Martyn.

"I felt like I'd been blindsided," he writes. "Punched in the head in a cowardly action from behind. By my friends. My best friends. I was losing my livelihood, my passion, but most hurtfully, my most trusted brothers. It was too much to take. I began to sob with rage and frustration."

And then, in a moment, the fate of everyone in the room was shaped. Out of the blue, Ian Craig Marsh spoke up.

"If Martyn is thrown out, I'm out too," he said.

It's a crisp, early spring Monday morning and I'm on my way to meet Martyn Ware at his studio, a brisk walk from London's King's Cross station. I make a quick phone call to let him know I've arrived. Moments later, a door swings open and Martyn's instantly recognisable face greets me.

There's no time to lose when you're with Martyn Ware. As we climb the stairs to his cosy, low-lit studio, the chat begins. He's been based here for a while and he's lived in the capital much longer.

"I've been in London for 40 years," he says, closing the door behind me. "I think I've rinsed it. I would like to live somewhere else, maybe a bolthole in the EU."

Like where?

"Lisbon is probably our favourite tip at the moment," he says, taking his seat at mission control. "I really like the people, the food, the climate. And there's a lot of culture in the city. It's got everything, really."

You're not thinking of retiring, are you?

"It all depends on my health," he replies. "Provided I'm well, I'll continue creating, because that's what I enjoy doing. It's not a job to me and I love just messing about. This is my happy place, you know?"

We're here primarily to talk about British Electric Foundation – specifically their 1981 debut album, 'Music For Stowaways', which has just been reissued via the excellent Cold Spring label.

I've interviewed Martyn before. More than once. He's great company, open and honest (brutally so at times), and he keeps you on your toes. All of which makes for lively conversation, as anyone who has listened to his 'Electronically Yours' podcast will know. More about that in a bit. For now, let's head back to where we came in.

The Human League are one of the pillars Electronic Sound was built on and there isn't much of their story we haven't covered. That Ian Craig Marsh was in on the coup and changed his mind at the last minute is a new one on me, though.

"Well, I've never had a platform to say it properly before," says Martyn as I look at him open-mouthed. "I don't want to come across as an embittered old twat, but there's so much disinformation about what happened. It suited the record label to have this narrative that we had agreed to a split and we'd left Phil in the lurch. And then noble Phil plucked these girls out of a nightclub. What an underdog story. And it's all a load of bollocks."

I settle in for the ride. I love this stuff, especially when I'm getting it from the horse's mouth.

Rewinding a little, everything seemed to be going well with The Human League. They'd signed to Virgin and their debut album, 'Reproduction', was selling steadily, but the label were getting a little twitchy.

"It wasn't moving fast enough for them," explains Martyn. "They had made a huge amount of money in the 1970s, a lot of it from the success of 'Tubular Bells', and it was running out. They'd spent a fortune on signing new acts like us, but it wasn't coming back in at the other end."

It was suggested that a hit single before the release of their second album, 'Travelogue', might help.

"We could feel a bit of pressure being exerted," says Martyn. "But it wasn't like I was waking up every morning in a paranoid state going, 'I must have a hit'. We were convinced we were on the right path. We were building an audience, doing a lot of live shows, and more and more people were hearing about us. We felt we were getting closer to the promised land. Internally, there was no sense that it was plateauing."

The Human League's swing at "the pop jugular", as Martyn puts it, was the 'Holiday '80' EP. Despite a 'Top Of The Pops' appearance with 'Rock 'N' Roll', it merely grazed the charts, missing out on the Top 50. 'Travelogue' came out in May 1980 and fared better, peaking at Number 16. But by this point, dark forces were at work. Virgin were fully at the show-me-the-money stage now. They needed a return on their investment.

"It was a fait accompli and I was the collateral damage," says Martyn. "But then it turned into something else when Ian, on the flip of a coin, decided at the meeting to join me. He was on the inside. He knew what was going on. I was the mug who didn't know anything."

These guys were your closest friends. You saw them every single day. What they did must have really hurt.

"Oh, massively," he says, letting out a sigh. "It could easily have destroyed me. There are so many stories in the music industry of people who, the first time they get a major setback, just retreat into their shell and go off to become a postman or something."

From the point at which Martyn Ware was unceremoniously booted out of his own band, the story only gets more incredible. With wounds still raw, and in one of pop music's most audacious Machiavellian moves, Bob Last called Martyn up.

"I think I may have said in my book that it was the next day, but I've been thinking about it and it must have been a bit later," notes Martyn. "I was heartbroken. I'd lost my band, but I had also lost one of my oldest friends. So Bob called me and – he's since admitted he'd planned this beforehand – invited me and my then-wife up to Edinburgh to stay for a few days to discuss my future."

Discuss his future? With the person who appears to have driven a coach and horses through it? If I was Martyn, Bob Last would have been a very long way down the list of people I'd want to talk to.

"The way Bob framed it, there was a lot of pressure coming from the record company and he wanted to protect us from it, because he was our friend as well as our manager," he explains. "It's not a problem until it becomes a problem, I can see that. But he wasn't keeping it from Phil or Ian."

Which is grounds enough to feel betrayed on every level. And yet…

"I've never been able to bring myself to resent Bob," offers Martyn. "I do think that he was looking at it from a business perspective. And I didn't see him as the prime mover. I saw him as a cog rotating in the machine."

Which was big of him. More than that, it was pragmatic and actually pretty smart.

"After the split, something inside me just made me want to prove them wrong," he says.

He quickly realised he wasn't going to do that by falling out with everyone. He figured if he was going to get one over on his former bandmates and beat them to the punch, he needed to move fast. His first stop, before he made the trip to Edinburgh, was a pint with his old pal Glenn Gregory.

"Within days, I took him down the pub and said, 'I'm starting a new band'," says Martyn. "I'd always thought that Heaven 17 – from the chart in the record shop scene in 'A Clockwork Orange' – was a great name for a group and I told Glenn I wanted to get a crack on straight away. He said yes immediately."

But before they could get Heaven 17 going, Martyn went to see Bob Last in Edinburgh.

"Bob's opinion was that my strengths were in the studio, so he said, 'Why don't you and Ian create a production company identity?'. He said, 'You can bring in different singers and it would be like a production line of projects and songs'. It didn't take me long to figure out that was quite a good idea."

With the production house seed firmly planted and, in a real stunner of a move, Bob on board as their manager, Martyn journeyed back to Sheffield, ready to start work with Ian as British Electric Foundation.

The more you think about what happened, the more astonishing it all seems. Bob Last comes up smelling of roses and ends up managing The Human League, British Electric Foundation and Heaven 17. But that's by no means the only surprise.

At the time, The Human League recorded in Sheffield at their own Monumental Pictures Studio, which sounds very swish – proper old-school Hollywood. Martyn says he thinks the name came from the movie 'High Society', but the place was some distance from glamorous.

"Oh, it was a shithole," he chuckles. "It was by the West Bar roundabout, but it's been knocked down since. There's a car park there now."

Monumental was a three-storey brick construction at 98 West Bar. It had been abandoned since its previous occupants – Leslie Walker, Fletcher & Saxton, veterinary surgeons – had gone out of business some years earlier.

"I believe the building was probably Victorian, but it had no architectural merit," says Martyn. "When we moved in, it still had some of the vets' tranklements in there – metal operating tables, syringes, that sort of thing. There was a cellar as well as three floors and it was frankly disgusting. There was no power on the ground floor so we had to use the first floor, tidying it up and painting the walls sunshine yellow to cheer us up a bit."

The Human League funded the studio and its equipment with money from their record deal with Virgin.

"When we got signed, we decided not to pay ourselves very much," explains Martyn. "We invested our advance into the studio rather than pouring it back into Virgin's coffers. We used their Townhouse Studios to mix in, but having our own place in Sheffield helped to keep the bill down as low as we could."

Of course, there's wrangling to be done after any break-up. If they'd been married, they'd have sold up and split the proceeds. The settlement they came to over the studio was quite, well…

"We were all very comfortable there, so we agreed that The Human League would use it during the day and we had it for the night shift."

You'd think there were easier ways, but when you consider what came out of Monumental in that first year – BEF's 'Music For Stowaways', Heaven 17's 'Penthouse And Pavement' *and* The Human League's 'Dare' – the arrangement clearly worked.

"For about six months, we never bumped into each other," reveals Martyn. "I think they were more embarrassed than us, but it was all very cordial."

Did you have to reset everything before you left the studio in the morning? Weren't you worried that, with everyone using the same kit, you'd end up sounding alike?

"I always thought, 'OK, good luck to them' if they could make anything from what we were doing," grins Martyn. "Phil and Adrian messed about with synthesisers, but they weren't deep into them like Ian and I were. I just went, 'I don't think we have anything to worry about, really'."

By March 1981, Martyn, Ian and Glenn were ready to make their move with a double-whammy release – BEF's limited edition cassette-only 'Music For Stowaways' and Heaven 17's '(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang'. My teenage ears pricked up at the Heaven 17 single first, probably via John Peel. The BBC went on to ban the record, worried that calling US president Ronald Reagan a "fascist god in motion" might be considered libellous.

A few months before these releases, in October 1980, Smash Hits had a picture of Robert Palmer on the back page. He was barefoot, wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt, and standing in front of a whitewashed villa wall, no doubt somewhere exotic. In his hand was a small box connected by a wire, but to what? Little headphones? Whatever it was, it looked awesome. In the very next issue of the magazine there was a competition to "Win A Sony Stowaway".

"What do you reckon that device was that Robert Palmer had round his neck on the back cover of the last issue," trilled the copy. It turned out that it was a "tiny cassette player which is light and compact enough to slip into the average pocket".

When I clocked BEF's 'Music For Stowaways' tape, I knew exactly the reference they were making. The Sony Stowaway, later called the Walkman, was a portable marvel, revolutionising the way we listened to music. And it arrived at the point when musical equipment was also becoming increasingly compact, as well as more accessible and more affordable, powering the synthpop explosion that was right around the corner.

I also knew I had to have the British Electric Foundation tape.

In the late 1970s, Sony co-founder Masaru Ibuka wanted to be able to listen to his beloved opera on the long flights he often undertook for business. But while cassette tapes had been around since the early 1960s, most of the machines that played them were too unwieldy to take on a plane.

Being the top dog at a world-beating electronics company had its advantages. Ibuka tasked the boffins at Sony to come up with a solution and the result was the TC-D5, which was launched in 1978. While it wasn't particularly compact, it was a decent first effort. Operating on batteries and with a built-in speaker, plus a mechanism specially developed for smaller machines, it was a hit with journalists and field recordists.

The work didn't stop there and Sony's next attempt, the Pressman TCM-100B, wasn't a whole lot bigger than a cassette itself. While this solved Ibuka's portability problem, it was a stripped-down adaptation released in the summer of 1980 that really marked the beginning of a listening revolution.

Sony's TPS-L2 – known as the Stowaway in the UK and the Soundabout in the US – was a Pressman without the built-in speaker and the record facility, but with a stereo amp. It also had two headphone sockets, so the listening experience could be shared with a friend. The record button was replaced with a "Hot Line", which activated a microphone for talking to your listening buddy. Sony soon realised this wasn't an experience for sharing, though. This was totally personal.

So when and how did Martyn Ware initially encounter the Sony Stowaway?

"Ian had one as soon as they came out," he smiles. "He was always ahead of every trend. He got New Scientist every week and kept up-to-date with all the latest developments. I turned up for a songwriting session at his house one day and he'd just bought – BOUGHT! – a Fairlight. Thirty-odd grand's worth.

"With the Stowaway, I remember thinking that, for the first time, I can have a soundtrack to my life. I was obsessed with film and I loved the idea you could create a soundtrack to your own experiences as you walked around the streets. Everyone does it now, of course, but it was a revelation back then. It completely changed the landscape."

What was the first thing you listened to?

"I think it was an Ennio Morricone tape," says Martyn. "'The Good, The Bad And The Ugly' maybe. God, no, it was probably another of his pieces, 'The Ballad Of Sacco & Vanzetti' [from the soundtrack to Giuliano Montaldo's 1971 docudrama 'Sacco & Vanzetti'], which is a favourite of mine. I can remember listening to Morricone and feeling like I was in a film."

So you're walking around, headphones on, in your own movie world, and you go, "Right, we're making a tape for this"?

"Essentially," he shrugs. "I thought, 'If we create something specifically designed for this device…', who knows? Sony might pick up on it. Then, of course, they changed the fucking name of it to the Walkman almost immediately. But I still like the title. It wouldn't have worked if it was 'Music For Walkmans'."

The title was a play on Music For Pleasure, Golden Hour and other ubiquitous 1970s budget labels, who issued compilation albums featuring an hour of tracks by The Searchers, Donovan and the like, as well as collections such as 'Golden Hour Of Top Brass' and 'Golden Hour Of Disco Soul'. Martyn nodded in this direction again in 2002, when he had a hand in 'The Golden Hour Of The Future', a compilation which included recordings by The Future, Martyn and Ian's pre-Human League outfit with Adi Newton, later the frontman of Clock DVA.

"Those Golden Hour albums used to put 30 minutes of music on each side of the vinyl," he says. "There was no bottom end and they were cut so quietly you could only play them about four times before everything was obscured by pops and crackles."

'Music For Stowaways' also draws on Brian Eno's 'Music For Airports' and 'Music For Films'.

"He was a big inspiration for us," admits Martyn. "I love the whole notion of the ambient world he created, but I was always more fond of his pop stuff. His first couple of albums were total genius. 'Here Come The Warm Jets' and 'Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)'… that interface between pop and weirdness has always been inspiring. You can hear it in the Berlin albums with Bowie too."

And in much of Heaven 17's output, come to that.

As Martyn and Ian's first full-length release since their split from The Human League, it was essential that 'Music For Stowaways' was a statement of intent. They insisted on designing the packaging, with Martyn's photos appearing on the original inlay and Bob Last being responsible for the overall look.

"The artefact was as important as the music," says Martyn. "We wanted to put a marker in the sand, to make the point that we were not abandoning our artistic side. I think that's part of the reason why the record company wanted to hive Phil off and make a proper pop band. They could see I was never going to compromise."

You did alright with your own pop band.

"But it was on our terms," he counters. "I think they saw Phil as a more traditional pop star. They reckoned they could make him huge because he looked great and, let's face it, he sounded pretty good. The other side of that particular coin is it can often lead to a quick burnout, and I was never interested in that."

So where did you start with 'Music For Stowaways'? Were there already ideas kicking around?

"We had been trying out what electronic cover versions of existing film soundtracks would sound like," says Martyn. "One of my favourites, which my sisters used to have, was Miklós Rózsa's 'King Of Kings'. It's a biblical epic, so I did a demo to see how a short and relatively simplistic electronic version would make me feel. I knew I could make it sound big, but I didn't know whether it would work emotionally. And you know what? It kind of did. So we started experimenting with all sorts of different genres using the System 100, the Roland Jupiter-4 and the Korg 700S, which is there..."

He points to the synth sitting not two feet from me.

"Then we got to thinking it was all very well doing these pilot ideas, but we needed to design something that really sounded like a soundtrack using the same forces. That's when we came up with the idea of 'Decline Of The West'."

From Ian's electronic rainstorm, the dramatic Mahler-esque minor chords, the sweeping synths and rhythmic heartbeat backing, not to forget the weird alien monster roars, the track is a towering piece of work.

"I think it's the best thing I've ever written, in musical terms," declares Martyn. "It has that kind of unresolved yearning. It briefly pokes out through the clouds into the sunlit uplands of a major key and then goes back down again. 'Oh god, my life is so...', you know, that teenage angst thing."

It's curious to note that Martyn has never composed a score for film or television. He's never been asked. Why is that?

"I have no idea," he shrugs.

I wouldn't mind hearing a Martyn Ware movie soundtrack if anybody out there is looking for a score. In keeping with that theme, 'Music To Kill Your Parents By' is an interesting title...

"Everything we did at that time was like creating a menu," he explains. "It was about trying to show people our tastes and what our skills were. That was our horror film soundtrack and it is genuinely terrifying. If you played it loud to people in a constrained environment, it would drive them mad."

So 'Music For Stowaways' is like an audio showreel?

"Yes, that's the way I felt about it," he nods. "BEF's 'Music Of Quality And Distinction' album was the same, but for pop production techniques."

The soundtrack samplers on 'Stowaways' are mixed with more conventional tracks such as 'Uptown Apocalypse', a jam with Martyn and Ian's former bandmate Adi Newton. It also features Clock DVA bassist Steven "Judd" Turner, who died a few months after laying this down.

"It was just us messing about," says Martyn. "We had a Dr Rhythm drum machine and we got in Adi's bass player Judd, who unfortunately lost his life to heroin."

'Wipe The Board Clean' is more uptempo, "a strident electro-punk thing, more a song waiting for a top line," as Martyn puts it. 'Rise Of The East' is plain showing off, with Ian simulating tablas and triggering discordant chirps on the System 100. It straddles time signatures too, which is always a neat trick. The opening track of the album, 'The Optimum Chant', comes with dubby undertones, plenty of resonating bass, and some very lengthy echo.

"We were heavily into dub," says Martyn. "Not necessarily the reggae groove, but the techniques, the weirdness and the futuristic aspect of some of those records, like Culture's 'Two Sevens Clash'. We were going to lots of parties in Sheffield – in basements, in terraced houses – with massive sound systems. Your entry was buying a spliff for a fiver.

"Those places had a big effect on us. They were where we first fell in love with bass. The beauty of analogue synthesis, and particularly the synths at that time, is the components haven't been surpassed, so the smoothness and the power of the bass that I can get out of the Korg 700 and the System 100 is miles better than the later Roland models. Even the JP-8 doesn't sound as good."

I tell Martyn I think one of the best tracks on 'Stowaways' is 'The Old At Rest'.

"Oh, I love that," he beams, firing it up on his studio monitors. "It's made from stems of our experimental version of 'Wichita Lineman' on the first 'Music Of Quality And Distinction' album."

The sweeps of sound, the way it arpeggiates as though it's shimmering with light, the warmth of the track... it's glorious.

"It's so beautiful," says Martyn as we sit back and listen. "I was playing the chords on the Jupiter-4 and it was triggering the System 100 in a semi-random fashion. If you listen to it, you can hear that it's 'Wichita Lineman', only slower."

He waves his finger, conducting as the sound swells in the room. Then he starts singing, filling in the gaps to prove the point: "And I need you more than want you / And I want you for all time / And the Wichita lineman / Is still on the line."

Have you nicked anything for other tracks?

"I nick all sorts of stuff all the time. I mean, who doesn't?"

PHOTO: TOM SHEEHAN

There is an alternative version of 'Music For Stowaways', which came out later in 1981, only this time it was issued on vinyl rather than on tape.

"'Music For Listening To' was a record company idea," says Martyn. "They told us they couldn't get the licensees to produce the cassettes… which I now realise was a load of bollocks. It was just cheaper to produce vinyl."

Curiously, the vinyl release has a different running order and includes two extra tracks – the short 'BEF Ident' and the 'Being Boiled'-ish 'A Baby Called Billy' – both of which feature on Cold Spring's 'Music For Stowaways' reissue.

"Until recently, we used to play 'BEF Ident' before all of our live shows," says Martyn. "It was created by our mate Malcolm Veal – Captain Zapp, as he was known. I really liked the idea of this kind of advertising jingle at the start of the record, a bit like Raymond Scott's 'Manhattan Research' project or something. I wanted it to sound like 'The Funeral March Of Queen Mary' from 'A Clockwork Orange' and Malcolm came up with this. It's fucking amazing."

So who is Malcolm Veal?

"He's an old friend from Meatwhistle. He played sax and a bit of keyboards. He was a great lad."

A short-lived but hugely significant youth drama workshop in Sheffield, Meatwhistle was the breeding ground for many of the city's musical giants of the day. So did Malcolm go on to be in bands?

"I don't know. I've no idea where he is now."

The real killer on 'Music For Stowaways' is 'Groove Thang', an instrumental version of the Heaven 17 single, where you can wallow in the virtuoso skills of teenage prodigy John Wilson, who supplied the rhythm guitar lines and that unforgettable bass part. But beyond the music, there was also the fact that it was a vocal-less version of a hit single by the same band under a different name, something that blew a lot of people's minds in 1981. Which was precisely the plan.

"Right from the start of The Human League, and even when Ian and I were in The Future with Adi, we all felt as if we were creating something like a Marvel Cinematic Universe," recalls Martyn. "Every piece of work we did was a part of it. It didn't matter what it was – a flyer, a poster, a cassette, a record, a piece of publicity in a magazine – everything had to feel like it was part of an integrated whole.

"We wanted to present to the outside world this notion that you were entering into our universe. And if you invested in it, conceptually, then you would be rewarded. It was like we were creating an alternative fantasy existence, because your real world – I mean, I was living in a two-bedroom council house – had no glamour attached to it. At all."

I got it. Totally. 'Music For Stowaways' resonated with me then and I'm genuinely excited about the reissue now. The first time out, there wasn't much else like it around. So what does Martyn think set it apart?

"I think it was pretty daring," he says. "It was designed to be an attention-grabbing idea for the right people. Fortunately, a lot of the Human League and Heaven 17 fans became artists, architects, graphic designers, journalists and the like. We were trying to reach young people who were interested in a brighter future and a lot of them were intelligent creative types. I'm not blowing smoke up your arse here."

Oh, blow away.

"You've also got to understand the wider societal context," he continues. "There was a negative vibe around at the time, so our attitude was about trying to provide a beautiful and maybe even positive alternative."

Life was certainly grim in the UK in 1981. After the Brixton riots in April of that year, social unrest spread across much of the country, fuelled by the fact that unemployment was at 2.4 million and inflation was running away at 18 per cent. On the global stage, Thatcher and Reagan were squaring up to Russia and the world felt on the brink of nuclear war.

Which explains why '(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang' doesn't deal in flowery metaphor. It's direct. It names names. Politics has always played its part in Martyn's world – he's a firm socialist, a proud product of the People's Republic Of South Yorkshire – so the lyrics of Heaven 17's first hit aren't really a surprise: "History will repeat itself / Crisis point, we're near the hour". The whole idea of leaders abusing their power was spot-on.

"We've been asked by various campaign groups, especially in America, to do a new version," says Martyn. "But we decided against it. It looks like jumping on a bandwagon and we didn't want to seem like we were milking it. I think it stands better as a period piece."

Bloody hell, though, they weren't far off. Add in track titles like 'Rise Of The East' and 'Decline Of The West' and…

"We are the Nostradamus of pop," laughs Martyn.

Martyn Ware isn't a man to rest on his laurels. While he's more than happy to talk about past times, he remains as forward-looking as he was when he named his first band The Future. These days, he has his fingers in a number of pies, and we speak about a couple of key projects before the interview draws to a close.

Like most of us, the pandemic gave him pause for thought. A little too much thought, in fact. He needed to do something to keep busy, to shift his focus from the constant bad news.

"I was getting depressed during the lockdown and wondering where the future was leading," he says. "I had to do something, but I felt no inspiration whatsoever to write music. Music has to come from my soul. While I always enjoy the process, I wasn't inspired to create any pieces of work."

What was it about the pandemic that made you feel like that?

"Oh, come on," he splutters. "Is that not obvious?"

But a lot of people felt empowered by suddenly having the luxury of a little time on their hands, didn't they?

"I can understand that," he says. "I know that it gave some people a bit of space in their lives to do something creative. But for me, I come in here and do creative stuff every day. And I genuinely believe you are what you eat. It's what's going on around you that informs what you create. It could be happy or sad things in your life. It could be your friends. And all of that got deconstructed during the pandemic, so I didn't seem to have the templates to provide me with the impetus."

So instead of making music, he decided to concentrate on writing an autobiography.

"I had never written more than a couple of thousand words before and this was 130,000. So I set myself a target of 3,000 words every day."

Which is a lot of words. That's a big daily target.

"I'm not saying that it's 3,000 highly polished words. I was pouring it out, which I found quite straightforward. The hard part was the timeline. I had this giant spreadsheet on the wall, which my daughter helped me put together. I employed her to help me as a researcher."

So you didn't keep a diary back in the day?

"No," he replies. "It took me months to piece it all together, mainly by questioning my friends and doing bits of research on the internet. Paul Bower [founding member of the seminal Sheffield punk outfit 2.3] was my personal archivist. He knows more about me than me. Thank god, because I honestly can't remember a lot of it."

Halfway through the project, another idea struck Martyn.

"So I was writing this book when I thought, 'Fuck me, who's going to buy this apart from devoted fans? How am I going to spread the appeal?'. It occurred to me I needed to do something to up my profile that didn't involve going on some fucking reality TV show. I felt the best way of doing it was a podcast. I know plenty of interesting people and figured it would still be good if it only lasted 20 episodes."

And so 'Electronically Yours', the audio version, was born. You will recognise the logo straight away when you see it. It features the two dancing Letraset characters from the cover of The Human League's 'Being Boiled' single. Talk about quality and distinction.

Martyn chats with a different guest each episode. More often than not, they're people he's crossed creative paths with at some point. Many of them are close pals, the likes of Glenn Gregory, Stephen Mallinder, Chris Watson, Vince Clarke and Malcolm Garrett. Others are stone-cold legends, such as Gary Numan, Gerald Casale, Tony Visconti and Sandie Shaw. For good measure, his guests have included plenty of current-day artists too, from Hannah Peel to John Grant to Róisín Murphy.

PHOTO: TOM SHEEHAN

Martyn's podcast was only meant to run until his autobiography came out, the intention being that it worked as a trailer. As I type this, Episode 137 has just gone online, with Adamski as the guest. There's also a bunch of additional material for everybody who is supporting 'Electronically Yours' by subscribing via Patreon (patreon.com/electronicallyours).

In Martyn's own words, the interviews are "rare and precious gems". They really are. If you're new to 'Electronically Yours', you won't know where to start. Martyn doesn't pull any punches and his insight is extraordinary. The episodes with Bob Last and Simon Draper, who signed The Human League to Virgin and was another key player in the band's split, are gobsmacking. And the reason it works is Martyn himself. Each episode isn't so much an interview as a conversation between peers.

"That's precisely it," he beams. "I do get a kicking for it from a lot of people, though."

Do you?

"Oh, yeah. People get really irritated. The most common thing is, 'You talk too much. Why don't you shut the fuck up?'. But the less it's like a traditional interview, the more at ease people feel, and then the more they open up."

How did you know you could do this?

"I like the sound of my own voice," he laughs. "I've never had any problem doing interviews."

You clearly enjoy it.

"It's a lot of work – I was releasing two podcasts a week at one point because it was saving me from going insane – but it's done really well. The numbers are going up all the time. An average per episode is over 5,000 listeners."

That's good, right?

"I don't know. I regard it as good for my mental health and I feel like it's some sort of a legacy because it lives forever. It saves me writing endless fucking boring books about me."

Which totally hits the nail on the head. Books and podcasts are so essential. There are hugely important artists who won't speak with the music press, let alone do something like 'Electronically Yours'. The thing is, once they're gone and their stories haven't been documented, they're going to be forgotten.

"One of the saddest things I ever encountered was when Eve Wood did her 'Made In Sheffield' documentary," says Martyn. "They were asking around for people who they could interview, so Ian, Phil and me were on it, as were Chris Watson, Paul Bower, Stephen Singleton, Jarvis Cocker and others.

"I was talking to Richard Kirk at the time and I said, 'How come you're not being interviewed for this film?'. He said, 'I'm waiting for "The South Bank Show" special'. I thought he was taking the piss, but he said, 'No, I really am. I think Cabaret Voltaire deserve a big feature piece'. I said to him, 'You've got to talk to people at any opportunity you get'.

"Films and documentaries like that will last forever in the world of the internet. It's all adding to the body of work. In the end, Kirky went to his grave without really ever having told his story. I think it's vital not to get bitter by a lack of perceived success. You have to get on with doing what you do and make sure it's available to people when you've gone."

That's an excellent point.

"The thing is, I'm not actually very nostalgic," laughs Martyn. "Which probably sounds weird for somebody who's just written a book about his life and spends a lot of his time speaking with people about the past on a podcast."

While Martyn Ware has always been happy to chat about the old days, he's celebrating his history rather than dwelling on it – and he can afford to do that because he's also very much in the moment. As I get ready to wind things up, he turns to the subject of Illustrious, the sound design company he set up with Vince Clarke, although Vince is something of a sleeping partner now.

"Illustrious is my vehicle for moving forward and has been for the last 20 years," he says. "We've recently expanded our staff in order to target new work in various marketplaces. One of the main developmental areas that I'm interested in is immersive theatre, which is becoming big business.

"I think this is the future of entertainment. It's all about creating experiential worlds and there's normally some kind of narrative that you follow. If you've never seen any immersive theatre before, do yourself a huge favour and go to 'The Burnt City' by a company called Punchdrunk. It's on in London, in Greenwich, and it's this epic piece about the fall of Troy.

"'The Burnt City' is an open-world experience, with something like 35 rooms you can wander about in. These people are the dons of this scene and I'm hoping we can get to work with them. My ambition, ultimately, is to make completely immersive, convincing, ultra-realistic experiences for people."

Which sounds amazing.

"But then that has always been my aim," he continues. "It goes right back to 'Music For Stowaways'. We create our own reality on a second-by-second basis based on the sensory inputs we are getting. That's all 'Music For Stowaways' was. It was putting you into a different headspace."

And with that, we have come full circle. All tied up very neatly there, Martyn. Thank you.

"I'm such a pro, aren't I?"

'Music For Stowaways' is out now on Cold Spring. Martyn Ware's autobiography, 'Electronically Yours Vol 1', is also out now, published by Constable. The 'Electronically Yours' podcast is available from all the usual providers

MAGIC TOUCH

Yellow Magic Orchestra co-founder, ardent sonic adventurer, soundtrack maestro... following his recent passing at the age of 71, we reflect on the remarkable 45-year career of revered Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto

WORDS: VELIMIR ILIC

Watching the livestream of Ryuichi Sakamoto's solo recital of 'Playing The Piano 2022' in December last year – compiled from a series of stark performance shorts filmed at Tokyo's renowned 509 NHK Studio, and devoid of an audience – a definite aura of finality hung heavy in the air. Before the broadcast, Sakamoto had stated that due to grave ill health, it would probably be his final show, and so it proved. After a lengthy battle with colon cancer, the esteemed Japanese composer and musician sadly passed away in Tokyo on 28 March, aged 71.

Sakamoto's extensive career, spanning 45 glorious and colourful years, has been well documented. Having made an indelible mark with his unique and innovative output, he leaves behind a vast body of incredible work. Weaving between electronica, art-pop, experimental, ambient and classical forms, whether working alone or with others, Sakamoto's oeuvre has had an extraordinary reach, trickling down and permeating contemporary music in all its splintered and variegated genres.

Born in Tokyo in 1952, Sakamoto studied at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in the early 1970s, focusing primarily on electronic and ethnic music, and it was here that he began to tinker around with Buchla and Moog modular synths. Following various projects as a distinguished session musician, he began his music career in earnest in 1978 as co-founder of the highly influential Japanese outfit Yellow Magic Orchestra, alongside Yukihiro Takahashi (who died in January) and Haruomi Hosono. They shared not only a special bond but a sense of humour. Sakamoto was jokingly dubbed "kyōju" ("professor") by his YMO bandmates, but the nickname stuck. An intellectual with an extensive music knowledge and an air of quiet authority, it suited him.

A huge influence on hip hop, dance music and techno, YMO's idiosyncratic sound – swirling with electronics, exotica, new wave and even disco – was essential listening for the likes of Afrika Bambaataa and a young Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May, way before the roots of Detroit techno had even formed in the collective mind of the Belleville Three.

Inspired by the work of Isao Tomita, Giorgio Moroder and Kraftwerk, and anchored in their own "Orientalism", YMO were hugely innovative trailblazers who embraced cutting-edge samplers, sequencers and new technology with a passion. They were one of the first bands to use the Roland TR-808 drum machine, initially during a live performance of Sakamoto's own 'Thousand Knives' track – with its squiggly synths and "clap syncopation" – at Tokyo's Nippon Budokan in 1980. And they were also early adopters of the game-changing Roland MC-8, acknowledged as the inaugural microprocessor-based sequencer. With such ardent dedication to machine music and its requisite accompanying kit, it's little wonder that YMO were often lazily described as the "Japanese Kraftwerk".

YMO also embraced Japan's burgeoning gaming culture in the late 1970s and early 80s. They sampled classic arcade games such as Space Invaders and Circus (a version of Atari's Breakout) on 'Computer Game "Theme From The Circus"', the joyously frolicsome opening track on their landmark self-titled debut album, released in 1978. While other artists saw video game music as something of a novelty to temporarily dabble with, YMO continued to explore and reflect its playfulness with real conviction, often forging new songs around those nascent sounds.

The huge boom in gaming at the time worked in their favour, helping propel them to superstar status in their native Japan – and eventually, to a similar status in Europe and the US. Released in 1979, YMO's 'Solid State Survivor' album, with its synthpop and cyberpunk aesthetic, was a key turning point and helped to pull in Western audiences. Winning Best Album plaudits in Japan, and with English lyrics by British poet Chris Mosdell, it eventually sold a mighty two million copies worldwide.

Although YMO had "paused" operations by 1984, the trio would reconvene and work together again at various points, both on each other's projects and as YMO (their last album under that moniker was 1993's 'Technodon'). Having released his first solo effort, 'The Thousand Knives Of Ryuichi Sakamoto', in 1978 – just before YMO's debut – the foundations of Sakamoto's future path were set in stone. As the years progressed, he would build on the impish, poppy and avant-garde textures of 'The Thousand Knives' in his own inimitable fashion, and continue to thrive.

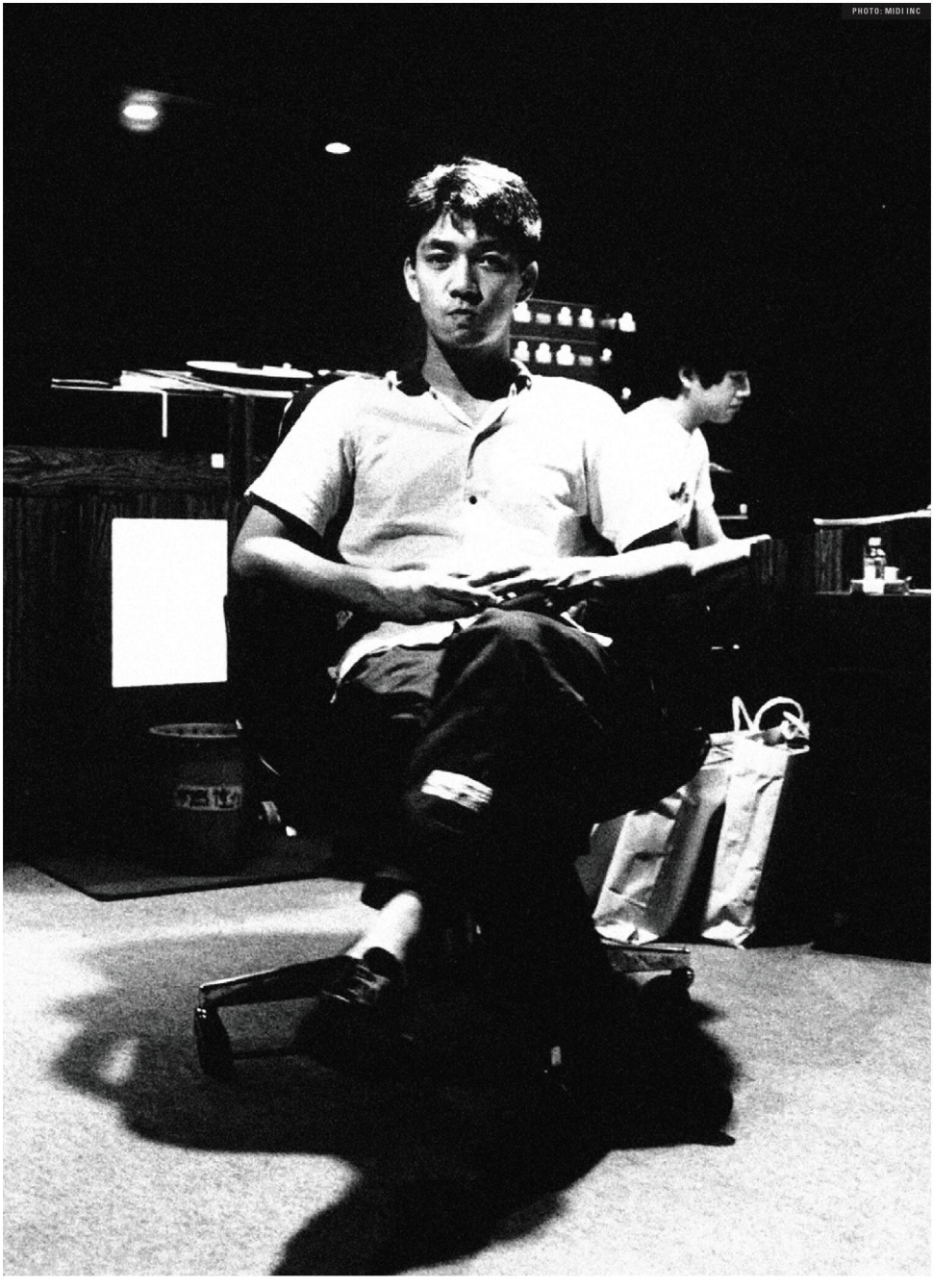


PHOTO: MIDI INC

A prolific and inventive solo artist, there are far too many highlights to mention in full here, but the early Sakamoto albums are real standouts, ranging in style and tone – 1980's thrillingly expansive 'B-2 Unit', featuring the wonky, Afrobeat-inspired electro of 'Riot In Lagos'; the propulsive thunk and clatter of 'The Garden Of Poppies' from 1981's wonderful 'Hidari Ude No Yume' ('Left-Handed Dream'), a glorious exercise in synthy new wave experimentalism; the glitchy ambient splendour of 1985's 'Exhibition', the B-side of his 'Field Work' single with Thomas Dolby. All pure gold.

Sakamoto worked extensively with a host of acclaimed artists throughout his long career, including David Sylvian, David Byrne, Alva Noto, Christian Fennesz, Iggy Pop, Brian Wilson, Robert Wyatt and Arto Lindsay, exploring multifaceted sonic textures ranging from abstract and orchestral to jazz fusion and beyond.

He garnered countless plaudits for his immersive film soundtracks too. One of his most notable was the beguiling score for Nagisa Ōshima's 'Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence' (1983) – based on the experiences of a prisoner of war in Japan during the Second World War – in which Sakamoto also acted (as the disciplinarian Captain Yonoi, devoted to strict order and the Bushido code) alongside David Bowie and Tom Conti. A haunting and evocative fusion of electronic, classical and traditional Japanese music, it's become one of Sakamoto's most venerated pieces of work, especially for the elegiac title track that fades in over the film's desperately sad and poignant ending.

That same track, of course, also lent itself to a vocal version, 1983's 'Forbidden Colours', with David Sylvian's voice adding emotional heft to the sparse piano melody and atmospheric synths. Sakamoto and Sylvian had worked together on the latter's debut solo single, 'Bamboo Houses' / 'Bamboo Music', in 1982. After Japan's split that same year, Sylvian was unsure of his direction for a while, but 'Forbidden Colours' was the creative spark that galvanised him back into action.

"Ryuichi gave me 'Forbidden Colours' to work on and it opened the doors for me a little bit," said Sylvian in a 2012 interview with The Quietus. "Suddenly, the flow of writing began to really open up and new material began arriving. I thought it was beautiful. Sonically, it was incredible. I loved all the samples that he was using. Sound design was a big part of it for us, and what Ryuichi did as producer was extraordinary with that particular piece of music. The melody itself was outstanding."

In total, Sakamoto composed music for over 30 films, including Bernardo Bertolucci's historical epic 'The Last Emperor' (with David Byrne, for which they won an Academy Award in 1987 for Best Original Score), 1993's 'Little Buddha' and 2015's 'The Revenant', with Alva Noto.

Even his late-career work produced exquisitely wrought gems. Determined to craft one final masterpiece ("I hope to record the perfect album before I die – that is my dearest wish," he said in 2016), 2021's transcendent 'Async' is a shimmering and abstract meditation, while his last studio long-player, '12', showcases an intimate diary of sketches that are "showered in sound". Both are undeniably majestic.

Aside from music, Sakamoto was known for his humanitarian work and for his activism. He was involved in various environmental and anti-nuclear causes, and was a vocal advocate for peace and human rights, as shown in Stephen Nomura Schible's celebrated 2017 documentary, 'Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda', which follows the musician's creative process as he works on 'Async' while recovering from his initial cancer diagnosis. In the film, Sakamoto talks about Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's "profound love and reverence for the sound of things", but he could just as easily have been referring to himself.

The outpouring of sadness and grief for Sakamoto has been ameliorated by many warm tributes and a huge appreciation of the great man's work. One of the most affectionate was from Thomas Dolby:

"He was incredible, gentle, intelligent… a brilliant musician, with fantastic technique on the keyboard, an amazing student of classical composition and film score writer. Obviously, 'Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence' is his classic, but he won an Oscar for 'The Last Emperor'. I now teach film music at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, and we very often talk about that score. I will miss him."

American sound artist Taylor Deupree, who Sakamoto worked with on numerous occasions, remembers a focused and contemplative man.

"One of my biggest, lasting impressions of Ryuichi was his quietness, at least around me," says Deupree. "Besides briefly discussing a game plan for a performance, we were often quite quiet backstage. I tried to respect his space, physically and mentally. What we shared mostly was sound and a connection through the performances with a lot of listening to each other. The times we got most talkative, or even silly, were usually outside of music – at a restaurant, for example, where we could leave the music behind."

And there was a particularly touching farewell message from his friend Carsten Nicolai, aka Alva Noto, who Sakamoto collaborated extensively with, both on record (2002's 'Vrioon' is widely considered to be their most definitive work) and in concert. The pair's two live albums, 'Glass' (2018) and 'Two' (2019), are a testament not only to their fearlessness via minimal electronics and neoclassical improv, but also their unique connection.

"We will miss you on this side of life," said Nicolai via Twitter. "A void is left that I cannot fully grasp at the moment. Our deepest condolences to those who were closest to him."

In addition to the vast array of tributes, Sakamoto's legacy is also being celebrated in recorded form. Following on from 2022's beautifully complex 'To The Moon And Back', which featured Sakamoto tracks "remodelled" by contemporary artists, friends and collaborators – Alva Noto's sombre and minimal take on 'The Sheltering Sky' is particularly heartrending – a new album, 'Travesía', collects 20 further solo works and scores, some lesser-known, curated by 'The Revenant' director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Wallowingly gauzy and evocative, they're a fitting epitaph to a true maestro.

With everything Sakamoto achieved, it's difficult to picture life without him. In 2019, speaking as part of Barcelona's Sónar festival at an international congress exploring the impact of creativity and imagining new futures, he relayed his thoughts on music technology, and how Beethoven – one of his adolescent heroes alongside the likes of Debussy, Liszt, The Beatles and John Cage – might have perceived it.

"I have been thinking about what music is for a long time," he said. "I'm still asking myself what music is. Of course, nobody has an answer. Musicians and composers are very keen on new technology. We consider Beethoven as very classical, a dated composer, but at that time, the pianoforte was a new technology, and he wrote 32 sonatas for this new kind of instrument. I believe if Beethoven would be alive now, he would be very keen to use new technology – the internet or VR, maybe. Can you imagine?"

Beethoven's pioneering spirit was more than a little evident in Sakamoto too, and the world will be just that bit poorer and less vibrant without the gifted Japanese composer's sound palette to enrich it. Listening to 'Async' now, its peerless, contemplative spirituality feels doubly resonant. When David Sylvian recites "Cities and seas, iridescent, intensified / A mother in tears takes a child on her lap" on 'Life, Life', it's almost too much to bear.

The final word falls to Jean-Michel Jarre. Cutting through the deluge of love and praise for Sakamoto, he tweeted his own deliciously succinct but noble goodbye, which feels more than apt here.

"RIP my dear Ryuichi, your art will remain forever."

Amen to that.

Ryuichi Sakamoto: 17 January 1952 – 28 March 2023

MAEL MEN

Ron and Russell Mael talk about Veronica Lake, North Korean military pageantry and their expanding collection of trainers and snow globes. Oh, and their 25th studio album, 'The Girl Is Crying In Her Latte'. Yes, it's just another day in the strange and beautiful world of Sparks

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: MUNACHI OSEGBU

"During the Second World War, so many women were following Veronica Lake's fashion sense that the US government had to find a way of getting her to change it," says Russell Mael.

It's a breezy LA morning for Sparks, and Russell and Ron Mael are both immaculate in black. Two minutes into the conversation, and we're discussing… well, Veronica Lake – the 1940s actress whose career encompassed a string of classic film noirs and, indeed, who has inspired a rather spiffy number on the splendid new Sparks album, 'The Girl Is Crying In Her Latte'.

I wasn't sure if the song, simply titled 'Veronica Lake' and filled with wartime imagery, was a cunning metaphor for the current situation in Ukraine. It's not. It's about Veronica Lake. More specifically, it's about the movie star reluctantly changing her signature long hairstyle in 1943 at the request of the Franklin D Roosevelt administration.

"Veronica Lake's hair was causing a problem with women working in factories – their long hair was getting stuck in the machines," continues Russell. "So the government asked her to change her style to help with their safety."

"She was never as popular again after that," adds Ron. "She did things that were well known. For about five years she was probably the biggest actress in the world. But it was brief. Partly because of her personal problems but also… changing that peekaboo hairstyle was like kryptonite! She was never quite the same. Seeing only half her face was quite a thrill."

The Maels, it always strikes me, are collectors. Not just of a blissful cavalcade of actual *stuff*, but of anecdotes, stories and gleefully quirky footnotes from the frontlines of popular culture. For over 50 years now, tides of this delicious flotsam have washed up on a grand total of 25 studio albums.

Further evidence? Also on the new record is 'We Go Dancing', a sardonic paean to the choreographed military parades of North Korea: "Pyongyang is a-rockin', missiles driving through the square / We go dancing proudly, legs are kicking in the air."

"The title of that song had come up, but it was just such a mundane and hackneyed title for a pop song, and we didn't want it to be about dancing in a club," says Russell. "So we had the idea of attaching it to the pageantry of North Korea. The military displays where people are – in their own way – dancing and parading as though it was a fashion show. With the women all perfectly in lockstep, their hair all done uniformly, and Kim Jong-Un, in essence, taking on the role of the DJ."

Given the bizarre nature of the Sparks story, it doesn't seem entirely impossible for the Maels to have actually trodden on North Korean soil at some point in the last five decades. So have they?

"Not lately," deadpans Ron.

But, alongside the brothers' gleeful curation of pop culture imagery, the album is tinged with feelings and memories that seem decidedly more personal, even occasionally melancholy.

The title track, for all of its musical joie de vivre, depicts a succession of tearful coffee drinkers all arriving, one after the other, at a lonely table for one.

"It just seems like there are always people sitting at tables by themselves," says Ron. "And you sometimes wonder what their story is. And what they're thinking about when they put away their phone and sit staring into their latte.

"People sometimes mention that they feel our songs aren't based so much on personal experiences – which can be true. But you still draw on the impressions you get from what's around you. And nowadays, we don't have many personal experiences other than going to coffee shops."

Does that assumption frustrate them, I wonder? Sparks songs have always been rooted in humour, but many of their lyrics seem deceptively confessional, including several on the new album. Surely 'Gee, That Was Fun' is a pretty direct look back at a mismatched romance? "Should have spent less time watching sports, should have improved my quick retorts / You were a bit too good for me, didn't take long 'til you agreed."

"So many people open up their hearts within pop music," says Ron. "And it's done in a way that's kind of obvious – meeting somebody at a certain time, or having an affair that didn't work out.

"It's more difficult to pinpoint that with Sparks songs. Maybe sometimes the personal touch is couched in a situation that isn't immediately identifiable as being a part of us. But I definitely think it's there. We're not at all distanced from what we're writing about, but lyrically we try to find ways to express things that aren't the most obvious ways to say something."

So which songs on the new album are the most personal, I wonder? It's an impertinent question, and I jokingly undermine it – I know they won't tell me, I chuckle. But they do. And I was right. Well, possibly.

"Something like 'Gee, That Was Fun'…" says Ron. "Of course, it can be taken in several ways – it can be a personal situation, or you can relate it to Sparks, addressing our audience. But I think the lyrics are pretty direct. You don't need a dictionary to figure out the sentiment."

Let's discuss electronic music. Edgar Wright's excellent 2021 documentary, 'The Sparks Brothers', shone the spotlight on one of the Maels' first compositions, 1966's 'Computer Girl', recorded in their earliest guise as The Urban Renewal Project. It's a beautiful relic of the era. "If you'd like / A date with her / Stick an IBM card / In her stomach," sings an 18-year-old Russell Mael to a throbbing psychedelic backbeat. So they've always had this interest in the vanguard of new technology? Even Russell confesses to feeling surprised.

"It was really interesting for us to have some focus put on that song in the documentary," he says. "Like, 'Wow, we were talking about computers way back then?'. We were certainly surprised that we were doing that in 1966, because there certainly weren't any home computers around. They were all in scientific institutions."

Their quirkiness brought them to the attention of Todd Rundgren – another nascent scenester with a burgeoning interest in the possibilities afforded by new technology. In 1971, with their band renamed Halfnelson, the Maels teamed up with Rundgren to work on their debut album proper. Buried deep in 'The Sparks Brothers' Blu-ray extras is a touching reunion – the first time Rundgren and the Maels have seen each other since that album was completed, five decades earlier.

"There wasn't a falling out – it was just one of those things," says Ron. "Before we had any records, we made tapes with really elaborate packaging and sent them out to people. We assumed, 'Well, everyone's going to go for this…'. But it was only Todd! And we're forever indebted to him. Not only for embracing those songs, but also – when the time came to record them – for keeping the essence of what they were. He didn't want to change our sensibility.

"When most producers hear a band that isn't what they've heard before, their inclination is to homogenise them. But Todd was the opposite. He wanted to keep the eccentricity. It was pretty amazing seeing him after that length of time."

The full-scale conversion to synthpop came with 1979's groundbreaking album, 'No 1 In Heaven'. Produced – of course – by a founding father of the movement.

"Giorgio Moroder was one of the people who got us really connected into the whole electronic world," says Russell. "And how much has that whole world changed since the time we worked with him? To get those sounds, you absolutely had to go to a studio that was well equipped with these big, modular Moog synthesisers, whereas now you can literally get them from a laptop."

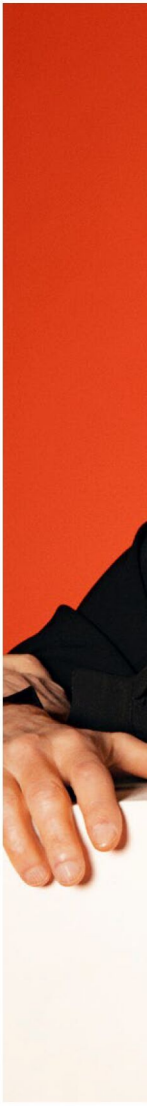
"Because of that, in 1979, we couldn't tour with 'No 1 Song In Heaven'," adds Ron. "There just wasn't a way to do it onstage."

Did they face any pushback? This was the era, lest we forget, of the vinyl-burning "Disco Sucks" movement in the US. More understated sentiments in Britain manifested in "Musicians' Union Says Keep Music Live" stickers, plastered in the back windows of Citroën 2CVs.

You'd hesitate to ever call Sparks a traditional rock band, but they've never been strangers to bass/drums/guitar. Did the switch to electronica prompt accusations of treachery?

"Yeah," nods Russell. "But it was odd – it was mainly from critics… 'It's a machine playing the music'. Playing with guitars was real music, and electronic music was a lesser form. We didn't think that way at all. It was just a different backdrop for the music we were making, so for us the argument was a non-starter.

"Although there *were* those camps, the public was 100 per cent supportive of what we were doing. They left the critics behind. Three of the songs from that album went into the UK Top 40, so they had no problem with us making electronic music. It was the critics who thought we were being blasphemous."



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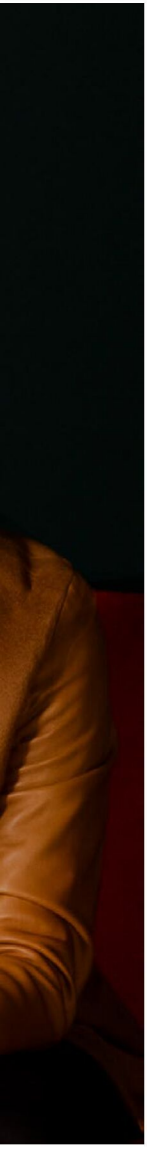


Both Russell and Ron are ineffably polite. Charming, thoughtful, soft-spoken. As a giddy child of the 1970s, it's hard not to pepper them with the daffy Sparks-related trivia that has bounced around my head for a lifetime, and they listen with heartwarming patience. Are they aware, I wonder, of a 1975 episode of knockabout BBC kids' programme 'Crackerjack!', in which the presenter, Don Maclean, sings 'Something For The Girl With Everything', while hitting Peter Glaze over the head with an old boot?

"I don't think so, but we'll check it out," smiles Russell, looking appropriately bemused.

The conversation also turns to Ron's beloved Shangri-Las and his adoration of their genuinely poignant 1966 single, 'Past, Present And Future'. And then it's the westerns and war films the Maels used to watch with their father on blissful childhood visits to 1950s cinemas.

"Two movies, a newsreel and a cartoon," says Ron. "That, for us, was an amazing Saturday."

Those giddy ebbs of pop culture odds and ends – the forgotten films and TV shows, the heartbreaking drama couched in disposable pop songs – are washing over us again. How about reaching out and grabbing one at random. Something tangible this time, something from an *actual* collection.

On a shelf behind Ron, I notice, rests a tiny fraction of his notoriously vast collection of boxed and unworn trainers. Is he familiar with the collector's dream? Surely we've all had it. You walk into a mysterious shop, and there on the shelf is every single item missing from your prized collection of whatevers. But the shop doesn't take credit cards, so you dash outside to a cash machine. And when you look back over your shoulder, the shop has vanished.

"The internet is that shop nowadays," chuckles Ron. "For sneakers, anyway – it's made them too easy to get. Most of my sneakers I actually bought on their release date, and that was the fun thing. There were tons of kids, and you'd wait in line outside the shoe place in the mall until they opened at 6am. It made the shoes *mean* more, especially when everyone was wrestling to get the last pair in size 12. But that kind of hunt is gone now! It was really exciting."

He collects snow globes as well – those little glass domes you shake to make a fake snowstorm. He's got thousands of them. Is that it, though? Sneakers and snow globes? Or does he collect anything else? He gives the bashful sideways glance and half-smile we've all seen in vintage 'Top Of The Pops' performances, and it gives me a genuine tingle.

"No, it's kind of… everything."

And Russell? Is he the non-collecting Mael brother?

"No, I collect stuff too," he smiles. "We go to Japan a lot, and there are too many things to buy and collect there. Little figurines of characters. But then they make them into a series and you need to buy all 250 of them."

Oh, which characters?

"All kinds of things," he shrugs. "Sunny Angel – do you know about him? They're kind of Kewpie doll characters. But you can never just buy the figures you want. The collections are unmarked, so you don't know which ones you're going to get. You have to randomly buy them and take a chance. And they are not cheap.

"I used to really like Pez dispensers, but now they're on the internet too. So if you have the money, you can just buy every single one. And that took the fun out of it – because whoever has the most money can have the best collection. Maybe that's just the way life is? But it took the sport out of finding one really cheap from an old lady who didn't know it was valuable."

This is what I love about Sparks. Even their hobbies are pursued with maximum dedication. Their work ethic, wherever they apply it, is unparalleled – 25 albums in 52 years, and another world tour on the horizon. In 2021, they collaborated with French director Leos Carax, writing and scoring the Adam Driver movie 'Annette'. A follow-up film, 'X Crucior', is now in the offing. How do they crowbar so much in?

"If you want to get something accomplished, you have to work at it," says Russell. "The new movie is a full-length feature film with a lot of music and a narrative story. And it's taken a lot of time, so we've spent a lot of time working."

I'm aware I don't have much more time with them. They have a whole day's worth of promotional fun ahead, so I suggest doing something silly. Instead of 'Mr & Mrs', how about 'Mael & Mael'. How much do they really know about each other? Russell – what's Ron's shoe size?

"I don't know," confesses Russell. "Big! Is he a 12? He mentioned size 12s earlier…"

Blimey, really? Those are enormous feet.

"Yes, but it's a US size 12…" protests Ron. They're both laughing now. But does he know *Russell's* shoe size? He's embarrassed to admit that he doesn't. Russell shrugs it off.

"If anyone is looking for that special gift for Ron this Christmas, it's size 12 shoes," says the younger Mael. "And if anyone is wondering what to get Russell, it's eight-and-a-half, American size."

And with that, our time is up. I'm gushing now, trying to cram in everything I've always wanted to say to them both. Racing to say thank you for validating those of us who share their obsession with *things*. Those of us who have ever taken old pop records far too seriously or who can quote, word-for-word, films nobody else has ever heard of. Those of us who have spent our entire lives feeling a bit weird, geeky or embarrassed about our interests. Sparks, for 50 years, have made all stuff feel like the coolest fucking thing in the world.

They say soft thank yous, both smiling modestly while looking bashfully at their feet. Size 12 and size eight-and-a-half. US sizes, remember.

"Just keep collecting!" shouts Ron.

They both wave, and then they're gone.

'The Girl Is Crying In Her Latte' is released by Island on 26 May

HEAVEN UP HERE

Australian producer and ethereal soundscaper Penelope Trappes returns with the haunting 'Heavenly Spheres'. Using just her voice, an upright piano and an old reel-to-reel, it's a remarkable record steeped in phantasmal atmospherics and hypnagogic strangeness

WORDS: SHARON O'CONNELL

Penelope Trappes remembers quite clearly when she first became aware of the expressive power of her voice and thrilled to the sound of it resonating in her body. Aged 19, with experience in school choirs and musicals and having taken vocal lessons with a woman at her mother's church, she went to study opera at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music in Brisbane, Australia. The revelation came one day while practising at her parents' house.

"I sang some classical piece," recalls Trappes, speaking from her Brighton home. "And when I heard my voice coming back at me, I was like, 'Woah!'. It really took me by surprise."

Piano, guitar and synths may comprise a strong supporting cast in her experimental soundscaping, but Trappes admits the voice has always been "number one". Never more so than on her new album, 'Heavenly Spheres', a compellingly minimal set of eight tracks with a haunting, meditative potency. It recalls Gregorian chant, chamber music and the work of Leila Abdul-Rauf and fellow Australian Lisa Gerrard, although the lyrics of her previous works have now dissolved into wordless vocalising.

It's ghostly music – just voice and piano, recorded on an old German reel-to-reel – both ancient and avant-garde, yet also beyond time, conjuring liminal states and unknowable other worlds. Despite the title, there's also an air of Gothic unsettlement that is very much a result of where and how 'Heavenly Spheres' was made.

In May last year, Trappes spent a two-week residency at 9 Church Walk in Aldeburgh on the Suffolk coast. A modernist bungalow designed by the architect HT Cadbury-Brown, it had been the home of composer, conductor, musicologist, educator and dancer Imogen Holst from 1962 until her death in 1984. The only child of Gustav Holst, the composer best known for 'The Planets' suite, she was a hugely significant figure in 20th century British music and had worked closely with Benjamin Britten for years both as his music assistant and as co-director of the Aldeburgh Festival.

Although Trappes had arrived with a distinct theme in mind for her fourth long-player proper, the history and spirit of the house conspired to steer her off in a rather different direction.

"That unsettled feeling was probably me accessing aspects of not having been properly alone in a very long time – not since my 20s," muses Trappes. "I had this concept of 'home' that I wanted to explore, but it ended up being just me grappling with this solitude and with things that I had probably never really comfortably gone into."

The house proved to be a powerful, all-enveloping environment. Trappes sat in Holst's chair, worked at her desk, played her piano, enjoyed the spring garden and browsed the "amazing library of all these really cool books about Cornish, English and Scottish Gaelic folk music". She also took long walks in the Suffolk countryside, occasionally in a somewhat altered state.

"I microdosed psilocybin a couple of times," she says. "Maybe it comes off in the music, because I wanted to access other aspects of consciousness and presence in this new world I'd been plonked into for two weeks. It wasn't super-trippy or anything. It was just a heightened awareness, like the light was that little bit brighter.

"I did a lot of photography while I was there as well, and even in the photos I feel you can see what I'm talking about. It wasn't imagined – it was simply my appreciation of it at the time. The light is gorgeous there sometimes, and the landscape is so flat and minimalist. There's not a hill in sight."

Spending time in this singular space enabled Trappes to go into more of an immersive, deep-listening mode.

"I would listen to it because it had so much history," she says. "There were church bells and the hum of the fridge, which was really old. You could simply sit and look. There were some lovely photos of Imogen Holst on the wall, and you could tell exactly where she was sitting inside the house.

"There was a strong presence of what she did when she lived there, but also of all the other people who've had residences in the house – a real sense of creative energy in the fibres of the building. I was actually slightly creeped out by the piano room each night when I left it. It's soundproofed to a degree and it felt a bit haunted when you turned off the lights and closed the door."

Trappes admits that although she initially found the whole experience a little overwhelming, it fuelled her creativity.

"Many of the people who had sat at the piano before me wrote classical pieces, and that's what I'm deliberately trying to avoid," she says. "It's interesting that it really triggered my rebellion."

That avoidance of classical convention included Trappes' willingness to go with the flow and her commitment to modern minimalism.

"I wanted to get to some mysterious 'thing' I was yet to access by removing any distractions," she reflects. "I didn't want it to be any kind of production online using plug-ins and what have you. I wanted it to be very analogue.

"A friend had gifted me this Uher reel-to-reel portable recorder and all these old tapes that came with it. One of the tapes had someone's recording of a medium at a clairvoyant event, and I don't think either of them are still alive. I listened to the whole thing. It was really weird."

Unsurprisingly, it took Trappes a week to acclimatise.

"It was the energy, the whole vibe of being in this house. I had to sort of strip away any preconceived ideas about what I thought I was going to do to get down into the comfortableness of it just being me, the tape recorder and the piano."

Yet it wasn't the environment alone that determined the shape and sound of 'Heavenly Spheres'. Trappes has long been drawn to incantatory and contemplative vocals and otherworldly, even eldritch ambience – music that's not exactly spiritual, but certainly of the spirit.

"Perhaps the whole Gregorian chants appeal is tied to my first foray into voice studies with my teacher, who was very into sacred music, and to my church experiences as a child. Being in church and hearing – not a choir, because it was just the congregation – all the voices resonating inside.

"I don't remember the services, but I remember the singing. I really like the purity of that style of sacred music. I love hearing choirboys and the young lead soprano in a boy choir. Heavenly. The minimalism means a lot. To give the music and your heart space to live in that sound is a meditative thing."

The "rebellion" that Trappes mentions goes much further back than her adventures in Suffolk. In her late teens, she applied to study for a BA at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, but was accepted only into the Diploma of Vocal Performance.

"It was because my theory was shit," she laughs. "I was like, 'Alright, well, screw you!'. At that time, I was very much into contemporary rock music – very Australian of me! I was in a band, and we were heavily influenced by things like Leonard Cohen and Mazzy Star.

"I guess my heart wasn't really in gaining a qualification, but there was an option to study privately at the conservatory, so I had weekly lessons with a lovely guy called Donald Smith. He's passed on now but back in the 1950s, 60s and 70s he had been a leading Australian tenor. He told me, 'You'll never be in the choir – you're not a chorus singer', and that encouraged me to create this sound from my body. I'm not a big girl, but I was making this big sound."

Despite the positive feedback and her obvious talent, Trappes then put her artistic future on hold to travel extensively.

"I kind of lost a decade in my 20s," she admits. "I was a bit of a wandering Australian soul, and the long and short of it is I didn't do a great deal of music after I left Australia until I landed in New York."

Becoming "romantically enmeshed" with someone who would become the father of her daughter is what originally drew Trappes to the city, and there she found herself plunging into a vibrant underground jazz scene.

Her partner was studying at the Mannes School of Music in Manhattan, and as Trappes had grown up listening to a lot of jazz as well as classical music, thanks to her parents, she embarked on vocal lessons with acclaimed Blue Note singer Sheila Jordan.

PHOTO: J RUCKLI

PHOTO: ELISE D LINDSAY

"She grew up around Chicago and used to go to Charlie Parker's gigs, to the point where he got to know her and they became friends," says Trappes. "So, as a little Aussie country girl, I had these two degrees of separation from Charlie Parker.

"Sheila was really about – and this still resonates with me – the bass. She did a lot of recordings with just upright bass and vocals. I appreciated the minimalist approach and the resonance. So that was very cool, and I guess that's when it sort of started."

The Golden Filter set the ball rolling. This was Trappes' collaboration with US producer and current partner Stephe (then Stephen) Hindman. Together they made gleaming, slightly retro music of a sensual, often brooding bent, ranging across art/synthpop, house and nu disco, and had breakout success with the track 'Solid Gold' in 2009. Releases have been steady ever since. Last year they shared a terrific interpretation of The Cars' classic 'Drive', but there are currently no plans for further recordings.

During her time in the US, Trappes also worked with Hindman variously as Lismore, Locke and Priscilla Sharp, all projects she describes as "interesting moments of character development" as an artist.

"In the same way that Cindy Sherman's different characters aren't representations of her as a photographer, just facets, I've explored as many styles and genres as I have been a fan of. These explorations have helped me find my true sense of self and my confidence as the artist I am today."

Trappes began focusing on her own work when she moved to London with Hindman in 2014. She realised then that she was done with aliases. For her 'Penelope One' solo debut of 2017, she hired a tiny studio in Hackney and started dabbling with just piano and voice.

"I had all these stories – very personal stuff – and that's when I decided I wanted to go under my own name," she says. "I just wanted to tell the truth. For a lot of the visual work we were doing with Stephe as camera operator, I wanted to explore the female body, the male gaze. I was getting a bit more serious about everything I've been through and everything I needed to tell, whether it was in my personal life, my creative life or life within the industry."

She describes her own music as her "Yin" expression and the earlier projects as "very much the Yang". The 'Penelope' trilogy (numbers 'Two' and 'Three' were released in 2018 and 2021, respectively) certainly points to an artist declaring their authentic self. In 2021, Trappes also released 'Mother's Blood', a hushed, drone-heavy version of 'Penelope Three' with her vocals filleted out, for which there was an accompanying hour-long film. Considering that record alongside the mostly wordless vocalising on 'Heavenly Spheres', a move into complete vocal abstraction seems possible.

"For sure," she agrees. "Although I still think there's a lot of power to be had in very specific lyrics or suggestive dreamscapes, while not being tied down to a literal story. 'Penelope Three' had a lot of storytelling as it was the end of a trilogy and a bit more autobiographical. That's why 'Mother's Blood' was specifically, 'Let's take this out and just hear what happens'. I guess I enjoyed the process so much that it's shaping my next however many months, years… I mean, who knows? Maybe the next album might swing back the other way."

In terms of the immediate future, there's the buzz of Penelope Trappes' new Nite Hive digital and cassette label, devoted to women and gender non-conforming artists working in experimental music. 'Heavenly Spheres' is the label's first release, and the next four are already lined up.

First is Portland-based soundscaper Patricia Wolf, in collaboration with Canadian sound artist Chloe Alexandra Thompson. Following on are releases by Pefkin (Ayrshire's Gayle Brogan, who has a folk background) and two fellow Australians – Karen Vogt (of Heligoland), a vocals-focused artist now living in Paris, and Madeleine Cocolas, a post-classical/ambient producer who hails from Brisbane.

"Nite Hive happened a little bit by accident," explains Trappes. "A few of the people I reached out to were guys, who were like, 'I'm busy, I'm busy'. The guys are always busy because they still dominate the landscape. It will change in time, but only something like 25 per cent are women at the moment.

"It's even worse when it comes to labels run by women. So it's about fixing what is essentially an injustice. As much as there's so much music out there by guys that I love – and I never wanted it to come off as insulting in any way, shape or form – I do think it's an agenda that needs to change.

"Hopefully, it's one avenue of helping address the imbalance. I reached out to a few of the people I've met to see if they would be up for it, and they were like, 'Absolutely!'. The general premise is to just step outside of one's comfort zone – don't do it like you would normally do it. I obviously can't control that, but I hope that's what they'll do. We'll see."

'Heavenly Spheres' is out now on Nite Hive

DIAMOND GEEZER

With guest appearances by Clark and Wizard Apprentice, Nathan Fake's latest release is a euphoric rush of techno, house and even jungle hues. Get thee to a dancefloor!

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN
PICTURES: ANOUCHE NEWMAN

This is undoubtedly a landmark year for Nathan Fake. He's just released an excellent sixth studio album, 'Crystal Vision', on his own Cambria Instruments label, and 2023 marks 20 years since the release of his debut EP, 'Outhouse' – his first flush of success.

As well as all that, Fake recently turned 40, a surprising milestone given his enduring youthfulness. He's been around the block several times, always in demand for remixes from artists such as Radiohead, James Lavelle and Luke Slater, and yet he still has the aura of an affable, and occasionally flappable, student. You get the impression that organisation isn't his strong point when, for instance, he finally turns up for his interview with me 24 hours late.

"Sorry about yesterday," he mutters, shaking his head. "I completely forgot."

Still, Fake seems to be in a good place right now, releasing his own distinctive music from the margins or, to be more precise, from the flatlands and vast skies of Norfolk. It's where he grew up, and he moved back there from London around 10 years ago.

"Doing what I do, you can sort of live wherever," he reasons. "I just wanted to be somewhere quieter than the places I was travelling to on tour. Let's face it – London is busier than any other place and bigger than most European cities. I found that a bit exhausting after a while because I'm a country boy."

Bucolic surroundings are better suited to his environmentally focused acid techno, which is as much a product of the land as the electricity that powers his laptop. Fake seems to revel in his solitary working methods, getting lost in his own world and headspace as he rambles through forests, capturing breaking twigs with a handy recording app on his phone, then repurposing and manipulating the sounds into punishing, propulsive, organic beats.

"I really like nature," he admits.

Yet technology has also been his friend, especially in reaching out for virtual partnerships. 'Crystal Vision' is a home-grown album with tendrils creeping into plenty of other fascinating areas. Take the standout track 'The Grass' – the result of a hook-up with Wizard Apprentice, aka Tieraney Carter, from Oakland, California.

Carter describes herself as a "structural minimalist but a micro-genre maximalist", and she's been releasing determinedly obscure works on Ratskin since 2018. 'I Am Invisible' is a particular highlight of her oeuvre, with its sardonically delivered lyrics: "I am free from the pressure of being special / I welcome the potential of being mediocre".

"I know her stuff through a mate in Norwich, actually," says Fake. "He was DJing at this bar and played one of her records. I was like, 'What's *this*?'."

Fake's youthful disposition clearly extends to an unquenchable zeal for new and sometimes recherché music. He bought a few EPs from Carter's Bandcamp before deciding to make his approach.

"I just dropped her a line saying, 'I really like your music. Do you want to work on something together?'. And she was like, 'Yeah, sure'. She lives in the US, so I've never met her. I sent her a demo version of the track that became 'The Grass' – she recorded some vocals over it and I liked it a lot. It ended up being a very smooth little collaboration."

'The Grass', perhaps the finest track Fake has ever been involved in, is an enticing crystalline fusion of beauty and mystery, where the bars seemingly hang for ages to ramp up the cosmic tension.

"It is 4/4, but it's not very regular," he divulges. "There are five bars of one chord and then two bars for another."

It's also odd that he doesn't ordinarily work with vocalists and is reluctant to sing himself.

"I've probably done three or four vocal collaborations in my life," he says after some thought.

Fake then sheepishly brings up 'Coheed' from the 'Dinamo' EP, released on the German electronic label Traum Schallplatten in 2005. He gets up-close to the microphone and croons intimately over a broken beat for that one, but he clearly still has misgivings about it.

"It's got my vocals on it, which is a bit cringe because it's so long ago," he winces. "It's the only track I've ever done vocals on, and I don't like it anymore."

Chris Clark is the other featured artist on 'Crystal Vision'. The final track on the album, 'Outsider', is a musical meeting of minds and something Fake and Clark had been intending to work on for some time. The pair already knew each other well.

"Yeah, Chris has been a good mate of mine for years," reveals Fake. "We met through music, and I was already a big fan of his stuff. A *really* big fan."

Turns out Clark's 'Body Riddle' is one of Fake's favourite albums.

"Then we ended up playing together in Reading," he continues. "I used to live there as it's where I went to university. We got chatting and sort of became mates over the years. We've remixed each other, but that was probably over 10 years ago. We've always talked about collaborating, and then eventually we did. It's really nice to have finally done it!"

I'm intrigued by the title of 'Outsider'. On Fake's Bandcamp page, his personal profile reads: "Growing up in Norfolk and attending a school where being into music made you an outsider, Nathan Fake's early interest in the electronic scene came from hearing acts like Aphex Twin and Orbital on the radio and reading about the equipment they used in music magazines."

"I think that the biography was written quite a long time ago, when I was still on Border Community," says Fake, bashfully. "But I mean, yeah – that is the case. When I was a kid, no one else was into music. I grew up in a little village in rural Norfolk, and I basically heard Radio 1 and not even any underground radio stations."

Fake began to absorb dance music through friends, particularly from the Ministry Of Sound stable.

"My tastes have slightly crossed over into that area, but I like more the techno side of things," he says.

Discovering Orbital, Aphex and acts like The Chemical Brothers inspired him to assemble his first studio set-up – a drum machine, a Casio keyboard and a Boss SB-202 sampler.

"I've done it totally on my own my entire life, save for the odd collaboration," he asserts. "So I've always felt a bit like an outsider with the whole electronic music scene. And that's not a bad thing. I'm very aware of the scene and I'm friends with a lot of people in it, but I've always felt a bit detached from it… which is fine."

I wonder if Clark, who grew up in St Albans, experienced a similar sense of being an outsider and whether they ever discussed this while making the track? Naturally, Fake says he can't speak for his friend, although he suspects Clark's upbringing might have been similar.

"He very much does his own thing. The difference is that he's clearly a big, well-known artist and he's on Warp. But Chris himself has always done something on the edge."

There's a far more prosaic, less Camus-like angle to the title 'Outsider', too.

"I like being outside," says Fake, matter-of-factly.

Nathan Fake has released several lauded albums, including 'Hard Islands' and 'Steam Days', which are the source of some of his most recognisable tunes ('The Turtle' and 'Paean', respectively). But it's probably his 2006 debut, 'Drowning In A Sea Of Love', which has endured above all the others, being earmarked as the "essential" listen on streaming platforms. Some of its free-form goodness definitely infuses 'Crystal Vision'.

"It's funny, because 'Drowning In A Sea Of Love' is sort of the standout one," he says with refreshing honesty. "Obviously every artist's debut album is usually of note because it's the first one, but it's quite different from the others I've done.

"It's weird when people say your first album is their favourite, and you've done five more. So it's like, 'Is everything I've done since then not as good?'. But I have artists whose old stuff I like, and there are others where I prefer their latest stuff, so I can't complain."

Fake's surroundings provide the textures that form the basis of nearly all of his music.

"The sound sources I use in my stuff are quite varied," he says. "I've got a massive folder of WAV files recorded on my phone from being out and about – I make them into kits and drum sounds. And I also use my mouth. I'm not very good at beatboxing but I like making singular sounds for hi-hats and snares."

I wonder if he views using presets as cheating?

"No, not really," he says, hesitantly. "I mean, it depends how they're used."

When he came to record 2017's 'Providence' album for Ninja Tune, he'd been wrestling with writer's block for a couple of years. It was the Korg Prophecy that saved him, despite an ambivalence to the way it sounds.

"The Korg Prophecy is incredibly hard to program," he says. "I actually ended up playing with the presets and editing them, although ordinarily I never use them. The thing with presets is that they're mostly ugly, unusable or over-the-top sounds. But with that album, I presented myself with the challenge of taking these horrible sounds and making them somehow alright.

"Otherwise, I'm really into synthesis, so I don't have many synths. The ones I do use are basic analogue things and I'll just make stuff from scratch, which I prefer."

I mention that Jean-Michel Jarre considers the piano a preset, implying that the old musical instruments we take for granted have sounds that were intended by their inventors centuries ago.

"It's like sampling," offers Fake, brightly. "The whole reason people use the Amen break is because it's very distinctive, and you can hear what it is. It's a sort of tool that people use to display their cutting-up skills."

For Fake's previous album, 'Blizzards', he released a Loopcloud Drum Expansion kit featuring three kit presets and a plethora of one-shot samples for use within the VST plugin. Has he heard anyone else use them in their music?

"Not to my knowledge, no," he replies. "They're quite distinctive to my ears."

After 'Outhouse' blew up in 2003, another track followed that would become Fake's most recognisable tune, with Border Community's James Holden providing a transcendent club remix.

"People still talk to me about 'The Sky Was Pink'," says Fake. "It's funny, because on Instagram I get tagged to it an awful lot in stories where people have taken a picture of a pink sky saying, 'Oh, it's beautiful', or whatever. Every other day I get that. Given the fact it came out in 2004, that's insane."

Fake hooked up with Border Community the way he has with so many others – via email. He was a big fan of Holden, sent him a demo, and the rest is history. He says he was very lucky to get in touch with Holden when he did, and for him to respond almost immediately with nothing but encouragement.

"Border Community ended up being this cult label – we never could have imagined it would get as big as it did. Amazing times."

As well as his brief forays with Ninja Tune and Traum Schallplatten, Fake decided to set up Cambria Instruments 10 years ago with another Border Community alumnus, Wesley Matsell, launching the label with the collaborative 2014 single 'Black Drift'.

Since then, he's released two albums via his own imprint, and if 'Crystal Vision' is anything to go by, he can certainly trust his own instincts. What's more, he cuts out interference from other parties, and relishes how it has consolidated his independence.

"Self-releasing is a big weight off my shoulders because I don't need to worry about whether the label will like the music," says Fake. "When I did 'Blizzards', it was a really nice experience putting it together because it was, 'I like it, and that's all that matters'. So I can just do it how I want. It worked out very well, and that's why I've done it again with 'Crystal Vision'."

'Crystal Vision' is out now on Cambria Instruments

SPECIAL BRANCH

Kraftwerk, motorik beats, New York synthcore, free jazz and lashings of psych. Deeply and thrillingly eclectic, the new album from Arizona duo Trees Speak is one heck of a sonic brew

WORDS: FAT ROLAND

You've got your finger on the pulse, right? You've got both eyes on the ball and various other parts of your body plugged into the zeitgeist. But here's a band who might have passed you by. A band whose international tour last year took them from America's southwestern states to Soho via Paris and Primavera. A band that produced five albums between 2017 and 2021.

Let's meet Trees Speak. Their psychedelic instrumentals contain colours of krautrock and post-punk, more than a smattering of Kraftwerk, and healthy dollops of synthy movie soundtracks. In their musical textures, you'll pick out tones of Neu!, Pink Floyd, John Carpenter, Tangerine Dream, Add N To (X), David Holmes and Can. Which sounds ambiguous and non-committal, like your sister's dull boyfriend saying he listens to "a bit of everything, really".

'Mind Maze', the group's sixth album, pinballs from claustrophobic minor-key jams to hazy lounge ambience. 'Sospetto' feels like an interlude from a 1960s spy film. 'Odyssey' is flute free-jazz in the boudoir of the imagination. 'Machines Speak' is a motorik techno quartet in a rage because they have accidentally recorded over their 'Knight Rider' VHS tapes. All of which makes this sound like a collection of extended 'Halleluwah'-style loop jams, yet it's powerfully pithy. Only two of the 19 tracks break the four-minute mark.

To extend the movie analogy, this is no 'Everything Everywhere' endless bagel blathering. It's the opening montage of the Pixar animation 'Up' – track after track after track.

I'm talking to the two band members via video call, and there's a hurdle to scale before a single word is exchanged. Damian Diaz is based in Brooklyn, New York, with his clocks set to Eastern Daylight Time. Daniel Martin Diaz lives in Tucson, Arizona, spending his days in the gloriously named Mountain Standard Time. Images of weathered goats wearing Rolexes spring to mind. And then there's Electronic Sound, working to our stuffy old Greenwich Mean Time. This leaves us simultaneously chatting in the morning, afternoon and evening, our time zones as expansive as the music itself.

"Man, I don't know if you've been to Brooklyn, but that place is chaos," says Daniel in Tucson. "It's like London, you know?"

He contrasts Damian's city life in the shadow of Manhattan to his own cactus-studded Arizona Sun Corridor. This area is home to The Orb's "little fluffy clouds" and new age ambienteer Steve Roach. The geographical disparity between city and wilderness feeds into the band, says Daniel.

"I'm in the desert where it's crystals and people burning incense. Some of our more sequential stuff contains the vastness of those landscapes, you know?"

Even their name, Trees Speak, refers to a kind of duality, referencing a possible eventuality in which trees store data and communicate with each other. Nature meets technology: an internet made of wood. They came across this idea while attending a lecture at a Californian futurist think tank.

This is Trees Speak's first media interview. Sure, there have been online Q&As, but for a band whose musical passion is as hippy and outflowing as a severed hookah pipe, they've been keeping themselves to themselves.

"We've turned down every interview," says Daniel. "This feels weird. I prefer the mythology, with people making up their mind of what we're about as opposed to us defining ourselves."

Daniel is an open book. He waxes lyrical about production methods, his collaborators and his favourite records. He often throws answers over to the quieter Damian, who's calling from his home studio. The conversation is free and easy, as if they've been doing these kinds of interviews for years. And yet, because this is a band shrouded in relative anonymity, when I push too much, the Trees stop speaking.

"You're brothers, right?" I ask.

Absolute silence. They just look at me, hoping either to stare me out or magick the question out of existence.

Another beat, then Daniel reluctantly says, "We're family, yeah."

More silence.

That "yeah" was non-committal as opposed to a confirmation. I still don't know the nature of their kinship. Don't expect too much biographical exposition in this article. Trees Speak are not keen on puncturing too many holes in their own folklore. Which makes sense, because the title of 'Mind Maze' references one of the greatest myths of all time. Sit up straight. It's time for a lesson.

In ancient Crete, King Minos ordered Daedalus to construct a legendary labyrinth – that's Daedalus, the father of feathered failure Icarus, not the foppish Santa Monica electronic musician once signed to Plug Research. At the centre of this labyrinth was the Minotaur – top half bull, bottom half man. As it turned out, the maze was rubbish because it was bested by Theseus wielding a bit of string, like a rejected 'Taskmaster' task that never made it to air, only more Athenian.

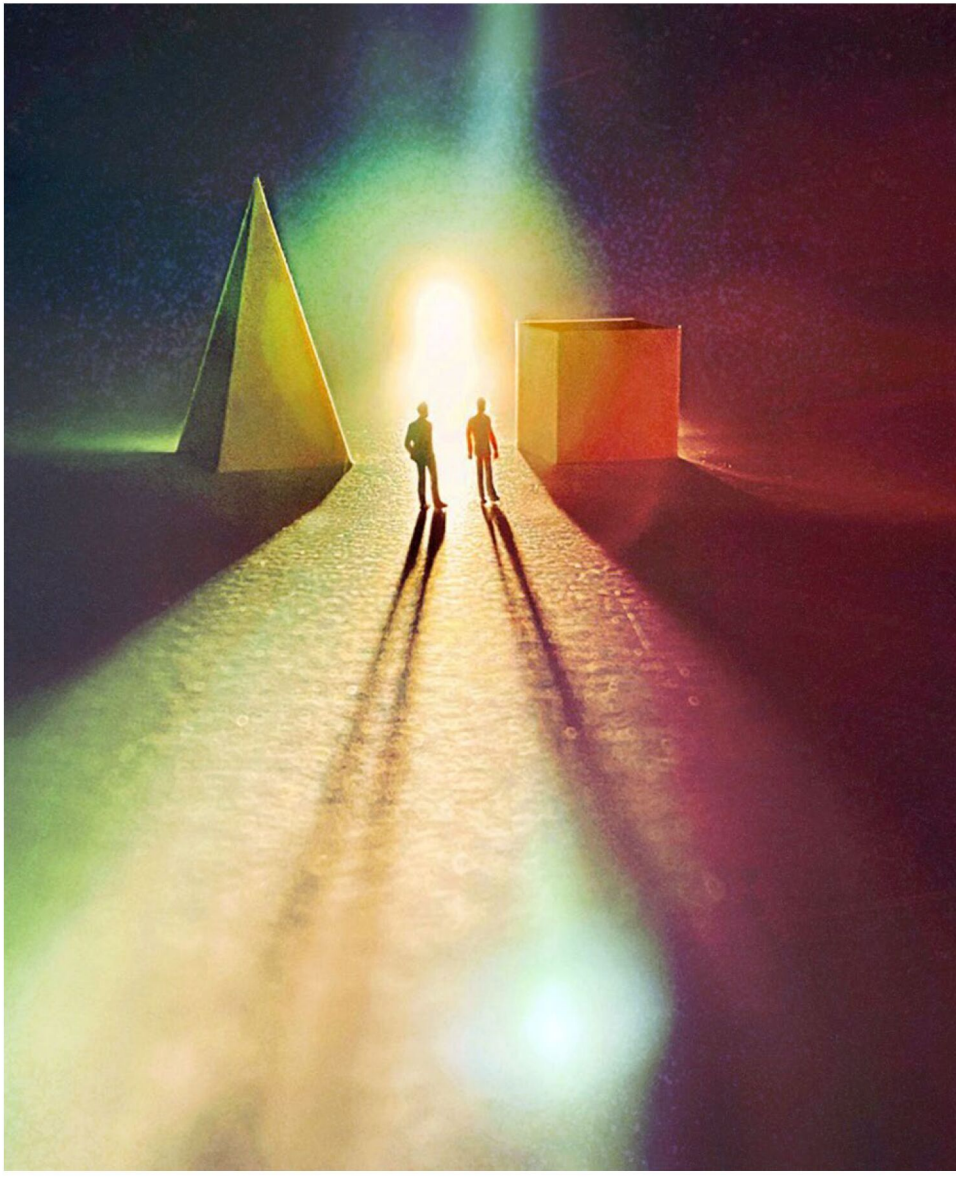
And the point of all this? Trees Speak see the concept of the labyrinth as a psychological conundrum at the heart of their latest album.

"Usually, labyrinths were designed to protect the wealth of the leaders," explains Daniel. "So they would always have a Minotaur or some secret code or whatever protecting the gold. But the Minotaur would cast a spell on the labyrinth, so anybody who entered it again got lost."

He equates this to the long and winding journey of album creation, to endless corridors within corridors and "all these weird doors that open in the hierarchy of your psychology".

Like the Minotaur, 'Mind Maze' is a beast of two distinct halves. It was recorded at Brooklyn's Mighty Toad Recording Studio last summer, with studio owner Craig Dreyer on engineer duties as well as throwing in a load of flute and saxophone. The first half comprises songs ping-ponged between Damian and Daniel. The more textural second half contains studio sessions with collaborators, including singer-songwriter Gabriel Sullivan, owner of Tucson studio Dust & Stone, and violinist Ben Nisbet from the Tucson Symphony Orchestra.

"While we were recording the second half, we were pleased about how organic everything sounded," says Damian. "It had a really nice movement that happened naturally."



"Ben's strings added an emotional element that took things to another level," continues Daniel. "He plays strings for the orchestra, but he also plays metal guitar. He's an interesting guy."

Despite Trees Speak letting a metalhead into the room, this is without question an electronic music album. Their vibraphone-hazed track 'Minotaur' could easily be lifted from a classic era of trip hop. 'Black Phone', with its melancholy synth buzzes, may well be a Massive Attack collaboration. They claim to be aiming for a science-fiction feel, what Damian calls "Radiophonic Workshop stuff", yet they're working with limitations.

"We don't have a load of synths with all those buttons and chords," explains Daniel. "We just have the [Moog] Grandmother, the Prophet and the JX-3P. We are so minimal because we want to get that basic oscillator sound without lots of bells and whistles."

They refer to the simplicity of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Kraftwerk, and to an unexpectedly more fantastic world.

"You know when Willy Wonka puts the boot in the pot and you hear the bubbles?" adds Daniel. "And then you're in the laboratory with all those sounds? That's what we're going for. Nothing fancy."

Gene Wilder's child-troubling chocolate peddler was not on the bingo card for a 'Mind Maze' interview. You can appreciate Trees Speak's gradual synth transformation by listening to their self-titled 2017 debut, which is more guitar-focused, despite the occasional electronic bass and a spectacular oscillator jam halfway through.

It's a reminder that there are indeed five previous long-players and that you, dear reader, probably have a lot of catching up to do (like when we all discovered the famously dense television series 'The Wire' way too late). After their debut, and before this latest release, Trees Speak put out four albums on Soul Jazz in two short years. I'm going to list them all, so have a pen and paper handy.

First there was 'OHMS' in the spring of 2020, which immediately made a satisfying dent in year-end lists. Some months later came 'Shadow Forms', its title no doubt inspired by the 44-minute psych rock-out that is 'Shadow Circuit' from their debut. The following spring saw the release of 'PostHuman'. Praised for its cinematic scope, this one doubled down on the Diaz duo's John Carpenter obsession.

Then, later in 2021, they unleashed the epic 'Vertigo Of Flaws'. This 29-track monster ended up as one of Mojo magazine's best electronic albums of the year, despite a difficult genesis.

"We recorded most of it in lockdown," says Daniel. "We were both going through lots of emotional stuff and we were worried about that. But when we got back to the studio, we just gelled again. It's such a symbiotic relationship."

The album's full title is 'Vertigo Of Flaws: Emancipation Of The Dissonance And Temperaments In Irrational Waveforms'. Going through stuff indeed.

As a rate of production, Trees Speak's is comparable to that of The Fall, Anthony Burgess or Kylie-era PWL. Daniel remembers a slightly snooty Discogs review that said, "At this rate, they'll probably knock out another LP by the time you finish reading this."

"They were roasting us," says Daniel. "But I loved it. I was cracking up."

Pushing their productivity is the style-hopping London label, Soul Jazz. Essentially a library label, it's an unlikely home for them. Their recent vinyl re-releases include historic reggae funk, early 1970s proto-punk and, on their 'Deutsche Elektronische Musik' series, a deep dive into krautrock. Founder Stuart Baker runs the label from an office above a record shop in Soho. The building, incidentally, was the location for The Rolling Stones' first-ever band rehearsal.

"There's no bureaucracy there, man," says Daniel. "We have friends in bands that have finished a record, and while they're still getting the packaging designed, we've already put two albums out."

"Stuart allows us entire creative freedom," says Damian. "They've also released so much music that is inspiring to us – it's a beautiful relationship."

When pressed about their creative process, it all sounds enticingly vague. Damian talks about "tinkering" and "spending a long time just absorbing" and "making a few ditties here and there". As for rehearsal time, forget it.

"We never really know what we're going to get from a recording session," says Damian. "The songs all end up being entirely different. It's almost like painting abstractly."

"Totally," agrees Daniel. "We embrace chaos. One time, when we were in the studio in Brooklyn, Craig said, 'Man, I got this great microphone – it's a stereo mic'. Do you remember what that mic was, Damian?"

"Yeah, it was this very rare vintage Neumann and it was his baby," says Damian. "He was going on and on and on about the cool sound we were going to get. And then the moment we started recording, only one of the channels worked. He spent an hour trying to fix it. So we recorded with it not working. But who cares? Whatever the universe is providing us with at the time, that's what we go with."

This is the same band that started their creative relationship by setting up a bunch of gear in a local art gallery. After closing time, they switched on a fog machine and a light projector, and pressed record on a portable 8-track recorder.

"Close the curtains, then fog it out," says Damian.

"The only thing we discussed when we started was doing minimalism," adds Daniel. "Just playing one note then building on it. Damian would experiment on guitar, and I'd experiment with the synths, and that's what we're still trying to capture. The innocence of the creative process."

"The fewest number of takes possible," emphasises Damian. "Keep all the flubs in, because then you can hear the musician."

'Mind Maze' possibly marks the end of Trees Speak's chatty era. Although they are likely to tour again soon, they don't have any plans for a new album. Well, not right now, anyway.

"We kind of go with the flow," says Damian.

Daniel, however, has a proposal.

"I haven't told Damian this, but there's an idea that's been bubbling up in my head," he says. "I want to make a record that's ambient, but not ambient."

"We spoke about this," corrects Damian.

"I just love those Tangerine Dream records," Daniel continues, unabashed. "Man, I used to go to sleep to those things. We could create a record that embraces those early ambient records, with a weird atmosphere."

I ask Damian if he's up for Daniel's ambient idea.

"Yeah, this is what I want to know right now," says Daniel.

Damian gives me that stare again.

"The next album is reggaeton," he deadpans.

End of discussion. Definitely brothers, right?

You're now fully up to speed on Trees Speak. Your finger is more firmly on the pulse, you've got even more eyes on the ball. Whichever part of your body is plugged into the zeitgeist, you can pull it out now.

My final question is a cry for help – where does a new listener begin with so much output? Daniel has the answer.

"You should start from the beginning and keep going."

'Mind Maze' is out now on Soul Jazz

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Gilroy Mere is Oliver Cherer, a man with a fondness for oddness. He's just released 'Gilden Gate', his third album for Clay Pipe, and it's a moody celebration of a place that no longer exists

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: JOHN CHEVES

"There are lots of stories of fishermen coming home on dark, stormy nights, seeing lights beneath the water and hearing muffled church bells," says Oliver Cherer. "Is there anything more spooky than that?"

In a perfect world, he'd be telling these tales in a broad Mummerset accent, propped up against the bar of an old sea dog's tavern with half a bottle of Navy Rum spilled down the front of a seaweed-encrusted jumper. A slightly unreliable video connection doesn't conjure quite the same sense of romance, so let's go with the fictional version.

As the hubbub of this rowdy clifftop inn settles to a deathly hush, Oliver ("Ollie" to the goggle-eyed locals) is describing the ghostly remains of medieval Dunwich – a Suffolk port city submerged beneath the North Sea for the best part of 500 years. The stories are the inspiration for his hauntingly melodic new album, 'Gilden Gate'.

"I go to Suffolk a lot with my family," he continues. "Growing up, my daughter was obsessed with 'Swallows And Amazons', and my partner Jenny managed to track down the Swallow boat from the 1974 film. It was just in a boatyard, and they let us take it out on the Broads. Another time, we stayed in Alma Cottage at Pin Mill, because that's where Arthur Ransome stayed. So I know the area well. But I didn't know the other end of the beach, the Dunwich end…"

A 21st century version of Dunwich still stands. It's a tourist-friendly hamlet of 200 people with a pleasant gastropub offering B&B accommodation. But this modest, modern-day community is just a lingering fraction of a forgotten medieval metropolis.

In the Middle Ages, before being consumed by the incursions of a merciless North Sea, Dunwich was a thriving port and city. Ollie uncovered its story while shooting a short film contribution to 'Sizewell' – a multimedia 2019 collaboration with Robin Saville inspired by the twin nuclear power stations a few miles south on the Suffolk coastline.

"I stayed at the coastguard's cottage in Dunwich," recalls Ollie. "It's an amazing little spot, and I knew the name from the Brian Eno track, 'Dunwich Beach, Autumn, 1960'. I'm a huge Eno fan. While I was there I went into this funny little museum that's only open on certain days, a dusty little place with rotting mannequins. And I found the whole story inside. Dunwich is just a hamlet now, but it was once a major city, which is just impossible to imagine. It feels like it was never there."

'Gilden Gate', recorded under his regular pseudonym (well, *one* of them) Gilroy Mere, has found its perfect home on Clay Pipe, a label virtually defined by its melancholy commemoration of "what lies beneath". There are wistful synths, mournful strings, lilting woodwind and, occasionally, Ollie's own decidedly Eno-esque vocals. And the press release sounds like it was dictated straight from the barnacle-coated bar of that ramshackle fisherman's tavern. The local friary "crumbling inexorably down the cliff and exposing the bones of buried monks as the graveyard follows the building's stones into the sea", anyone?

"Ah yes, the bones…" smiles Ollie. "The ruins of Greyfriars Monastery stand right at the edge of the cliff, and almost the entire graveyard has now fallen over it. So the bones of those monks have been regularly exposed over the last couple of hundred years. Nestling in the bushes there's a little plaque that says, 'This is the last surviving gravestone'. There's just one grave left, and it's right on the brink. I suspect, over the next couple of years, it will go over the cliff as well."

Let's talk lost places. Oliver Cherer – well, Gilroy Mere – has previous form here. His 2020 Clay Pipe album 'Adlestrop' was a contemplative homage to the forgotten railway stations closed in the wake of the 1963 Beeching Report. An album reeking of overgrown sleepers and rusting lines hidden by the swaying grass of silent, sunbaked meadows. The lure of this stuff is sometimes overpowering – the temptation to lose ourselves in this exquisite yearning for the vanished. And, even more potently, the *vanishing*. The uncelebrated ruins slowly being subsumed by layers of callous modernity.

"It's irresistible," he nods. "There's an abandoned Beeching station just down the road from me that I go through on the train every day. St Leonards West Marina in East Sussex. The platform is still there, but nobody ever notices it – all they see is TK Maxx as they trundle past – but I always look out for it. I always *think* about it. And I always feel somewhat connected to its past."

Is it the tantalising nearness of the past that is so alluring, I wonder? The medieval buildings of Dunwich might have long since slipped down that treacherous cliffside, but St Leonards West Marina was a working railway station until 1967. Only a few crumbling slices of buddleia-covered concrete remain, but there are people in their 60s who remember using the station. All those lingering embraces and tearful farewells, and they're so close that from 2023 we can almost reach out and touch them.

"Yes, and it's always fascinating listening to older people talking about how they used to live," he agrees. "My gran is long dead now, but she used to tell a story. She was born in 1910 and, at some point in the 1920s, her boyfriend drove her around London on the back of a motorcycle. And I found it incredible. I mean, that's what I did with my girlfriend in the 1980s! You think of your grandparents as being these funny, genteel people, not the kind of people who ride around on the backs of motorbikes being naughty."

It's a human touch that comes over strongly in the warm verisimilitude of the music. The Gilroy Mere methodology is not some remote, academic exercise. Ollie gets his fingers dirty. As a matter of principle, he diligently visited the location of all 12 abandoned stations featured on 'Adlestrop', tramping through summery meadows and grotty peripheries alike, scrabbling around in the long grass, making field recordings of languid breezes and lugubrious birdsong. He took the same approach to 'Gilden Gate', and the sounds of these places play a crucial part in his compositional process.

"I listen to the field recordings as I improvise," he explains. "They make you hear things you wouldn't otherwise notice.

"I used to teach music. And I'd take the class down to the beach, make them lie there and close their eyes. If nothing else, it shut them up for a while! But then I'd get them to tell me what they could hear. And they'd realise it was an awful lot. The sounds of tea and coffee in the cafe behind them. People cycling past – I'd ask them which direction they were coming from. They could break the sound of the sea down into four or five constituent parts, too.

"Then I'd ask them the old question: if a tree falls in the forest and there's nobody there to hear it, does it make a sound? It gets them to realise that sounds don't really exist until they're inside the heads of human beings. Until then, they're just moving air. I remember seeing one kid lying on the beach and his knuckles going white at that revelation. He was really shaken."

So where does all of this come from? Let's rummage further around Oliver Cherer's own family history – the abandoned villages of a very personal and private landscape. Sorry, that sounds incredibly pretentious. I annoy *myself* sometimes.

"Born in Clapham, brought up in Croydon," he tells me with a smile. "I remember reading an interview with David Bowie where he used the word 'Croydon' as an adjective! That's not good. But then in 1977, we moved to the Forest of Dean. Which is fantastic for your actual hauntology. Everything is an abandoned lime kiln or an old iron working. All covered in the greenest moss you've ever seen.

"We moved there because, in 1976, my mum died. My dad went to run an insurance office in Gloucester. I had some piano lessons, then went on a school exchange to Germany and I stayed in the guy's sister's bedroom. There was a guitar under the bed, and I thought, 'I could play this'. This was in 1980."

The inevitable roster of teenage bands swiftly followed. In 1981, it was 3 Imaginary Boys – "There were three of us and, yes, we liked The Cure" – and shortly afterwards the mechanical grooves of The Funktown Three. By 1985, his doomy goth band, Kiss The Blade, were recording Radio 1 sessions for Janice Long's show. But through it all, an enduring fascination with field recordings and sound manipulation was burbling away in the background.

"I was always interested in experimenting," he insists. "I had a mate at school who was really into synths, and we spent a weekend trying to make tape loops from his dad's LPs of steam trains. I don't know what we were trying to achieve, but we somehow knew that looping those recordings would be quite interesting.

"I had one of those really cheap Casio sampling keyboards too. I recorded the sound of water pouring from a tap into the sink and tried to play it back at a load of different speeds so it sounded like a stream. I was always mucking about with this stuff. It's always been there."

I'm going to attempt some appalling amateur psychology, I warn him. Children who have been bereaved can often withdraw into their own worlds of quiet obsession. Poring over these early experiments, trying to capture the essence of things that would otherwise vanish forever… was this possibly the result of losing his mum at such a formative age?

"Well, my cassette recorder was given to me by my mum," he recalls. "It would have been one of the last presents she gave me. I always had a fascination with recording things – even if it was just the theme from 'The Rockford Files' on TV. But dealing with my mum's death… no, I actually became more outgoing than withdrawn. Years later, it all came tumbling down and I did have to deal with it. I remember, at one point, a doctor friend describing me as 'pathologically happy'. Which was ridiculous, because I wasn't, really – it had just been my way of coping…

"God, *I'm* doing the amateur psychology now."

Ollie Cherer seems genuinely happy these days, I'm pleased to report. He laughs with raucous abandon, a man gleefully enjoying the amiable bumble of life around the music industry. The day job? Running a record shop in Bexhill-on-Sea on the south coast. And I've given up counting the albums he's produced under a welter of different aliases.

Gilroy Mere, he reveals, was a nom de plume concocted in cahoots with Clay Pipe's Frances Castle – "We wanted something very English-sounding" – but he's also been Dollboy, The Assistant, The Wrestler, even the perplexing Australian Testing Labs. It's a delicious meander that owes a small debt to the Forest of Dean's most celebrated 1990s chart superstars.

"My mate James Atkin was the singer in EMF," explains Ollie. "They got to Number One in the States with their first single, 'Unbelievable'. Nice, eh? I used to see him throughout that period, and he asked me to help out with a remix for Adamski, which I did, but Adamski rejected it. So we took his bits off and made our own record.

"We were called Cooler, and we signed to Polydor. They'd missed out on The Chemical Brothers and wanted big beat things. We did that for three or four years, then I started making records without beats. I discovered 'Music For Airports' around the end of the 1990s and thought, 'Hang on a minute…'."

And the latest offshoot? Aircooled, a kosmische-inspired collaboration with one-time Elastica drummer Justin Welch.

"I started recording during lockdown, and Justin was just up the road in his studio," recalls Ollie. "I sent him these really long tracks – 22, 23 minutes each – thinking he'd maybe record a couple of drum loops for me to use. But he took it as a challenge to record full takes. Twenty-three minutes of motorik drumming! I really liked the results, and it completely changed the nature of the music."

In early 2023, Aircooled toured with Suede. At the same time, Ollie was forging a further musical partnership with Lush's Miki Berenyi ("shoegaze with electronics… it feels new"). Naturally, the pull of his beloved lost places also continues to infuse a welter of additional projects.

"I've been working with a local writer, Alex Woodcock," he reveals. "He's become obsessed with a surrealist artist who seems a bit forgotten – it's either Stella or Edith Rimmington. Which one of those was head of MI5?"

Stella.

"It's Edith, then. Alex is a poet who wrote a really great memoir about his time as a stonemason. He worked on Exeter Cathedral. And he's now written a piece about Bexhill, and a place called Veness Gap… which, inevitably, no longer exists. And he's woven Edith Rimmington into the story. It's all a long way off yet, but we've probably got half a record."

This feels like a suitably poetic place to finish, particularly for a man whose releases are often accompanied by affecting verse. 'Adlestrop' acts as a homage to the poem of the same title, itself a touching 1914 tribute to the bucolic stillness of this now abandoned Gloucestershire railway station. It was penned by the poet, Edward Thomas, who was killed during the latter stages of the First World War.

'Gilden Gate', meanwhile, concludes with a reading that perfectly encapsulates the Gilroy Mere ethos – that, by celebrating these lost places and people in literature, art and music, we help to preserve their immortality.

"Beneath these moss-grown stones, the waste of years / Lies many a heart now mouldered into dust / Whose kindred spirits grace the angelic spheres / Completely blest, and perfect with the just."

"I found that poem in the Dunwich museum," says Ollie. "And I can't track down who wrote it. So I've got my fingers crossed that I won't get a tap on the shoulder from someone claiming copyright."

At which point, the lusty crowd in the bar of the Salty Sea Dog raise their collective tankards and burst into raucous laughter. Sound the muffled bells beneath the waves. We're all going over the clifftop together.

'Gilden Gate' is out now on Clay Pipe

ELEMENTAL

HAIKU SALUT
THE GENERAL

THE
PLANETS

THE TOP OF THE POPPERS
david bowie

ELECTRONICSOUND.CO.UK/SHOP
NOT JUST FOR MAGAZINES

INNER VISIONS

NABIHAH IQBAL

Dreamer

NINJA TUNE

Pull up a chair. Pop on your reading glasses and let's browse Nabihah Iqbal's CV. Under her previous name, Throwing Shade, she composed for the Turner Prize and collaborated with Wolfgang Tillmans as part of his Tate Modern exhibition. She sampled Shanghai street sounds for an immersive installation in which beams of light jumped through mirrors. She is currently guest-directing the Brighton Festival, maybe even as you read this sentence.

What else? NTS Radio host. Trained barrister. Karate black belt. Actual astronaut. Alright, I made that last one up, but the others are true. Based on such a winning career, this London producer ought to be as cocky as Kid Rock snorting lines of desiccated Kid Rock on National Kid Rock Day. So why does her second album 'Dreamer' sound so humble? So intimate? So poised that if you batted an eyelash, the atmosphere could smash into a thousand pieces?

'Dreamer' was actually ready a few years ago. Then, at the start of 2020, the unthinkable happened. Iqbal's studio was broken into, and she was robbed of the gear and the work that was to comprise her follow-up to 2017's 'Weighing Of The Heart'. She then found herself in Pakistan over lockdown due to a family tragedy, which separated her from her usual thinkpads of Logic and Ableton.

Stranded in Karachi, she had to find new creative avenues. Enter the "Lockdown Herbalist", an Instagram series exploring her grandparents' culinary heritage. Finding comfort in zeera, haldi and ajwain – cumin, turmeric and bishop's weed, for non-Urdu speakers.

Such nose-tickling curiosity led here. A work of dreamy pop, saturated with all the burned colour of paprika, infused with the kick of kadi patta. So let's start with the promo tracks, the fancy ones with videos that precede this album's release.

The clattering Balearic beats of 'Sunflower' feel like 808 State literally on rails. "Feel the power," Iqbal says flatly as she imagines falling in love in the shadow of its titular flower. Like the video, the music is holiday-snap faded, desperately melancholic, with a bucolic wash of synth sunshine. And she delivers her words so matter-of-factly, as if somehow afraid of getting caught in the emotion.

Then there's 'This World Couldn't See Us', cut through with memories. "Let your emptiness overflow," she intones with distinct iciness. Its video is a tribute to cities at night, a collage of neon and concrete streets, and at one moment we meet a naked statue with a tiny head. All the while, Iqbal dreams of a distant countryside. The breathy euphoria of electronic trio Real Lies comes to mind, while the new wave stomp and Peter Hook-worthy bassline are caffeine-pepped sisters to 'Zone 1 To 6000' from her debut album.

The title track is as shoegaze as it comes, but denser production provides contrast. Innocent pop melodies drown in a gossamer veil of ambience before a glorious surf guitar arrives to save us all. If Iqbal's previous work had nods to the Pet Shop Boys, here the pet shop is long closed. Cobwebbed over. Left to the elements, with wildflowers carpeting its abandoned cages. It's irresistible stuff.

The guitars provide so much emotional core, whether unfocused and wavy on 'A Tender Victory' or introspective and serious on the liminal 'Lilac Twilight'. Iqbal opens the album with the longest track, 'In Light'. The songs with the fancy videos will get the headlines, but this flower-haired meander through misty uncertainty is impressive. "In light," goes the blurry vocal, over and over, while gliding chords slow-dive over fabulously foggy guitar. She turns shoegaze into shoe-stare off into the distance. Filtered Insta-memories, an audio sigh of times gone.

Even in upbeat mode, the album tingles. While not returning to the more digital bangers of her earlier career, house tracks 'Gentle Heart' and 'Sky River' nudge us into techno territory – the former with a snaking arpeggio and a moment under the strobes, the latter letting a drum kit spasm on the dancefloor, whistles aloft. But while the beats pump, the flow is gloopy. A warm, orange-coloured liquid oozes from every pore. "The streetlights burn bright with something new," she says under the reverb muffle of 'Gentle Heart'. Everything is saturated.

A burglary and a lockdown, then Nabihah Iqbal stopping to smell the spices. And the herbs. And the trees. This talented polymath will reel off many more CV pages, but this album is front-page material. Nothing can replicate the grief, the displacement, and ultimately the hope that led to the creation of an album like 'Dreamer'. I bet she's an astronaut – she's just not telling anyone.

FAT ROLAND

KID KOALA

Creatures Of The Late Afternoon

ENVISION

Kids grow up and their career arcs are often not what you'd expect (see Kid Harpoon or Kid Rock). Canadian scratch DJ Kid Koala, (Eric San), made a big impression in the mid-2000s, though there was always a suspicion his metier might be too much of a novelty to be sustainable. 'Creatures Of The Late Afternoon' confounds any such assumptions by taking the 1950s into the future on tracks like '1000 Towns' and 'When U Say Love', while the conversations between automated speech generators on 'Robohotel 1' are as well-executed as they are jaw-droppingly dystopian. **JA**

BLESSED ARE THE HEARTS THAT BEND

Edgelands

SPECTRAL INDUSTRIES

London filmmaker and neoclassical/ambient composer Luke Seomore follows 2022's lushly orchestrated 'Sadness Be Damned' with this engrossing meditation on the sense of adventure and freedom that comes from exploring the margins of town and country. A place where abandoned industrial buildings are made mysterious and alluring by ivy and decay. The haunting 'Ghosts Of Ford' or the soaring 'Fernweh' expertly conjure a cinema of the mind's eye. Fusing field-recorded atmospheres, classical strings and subtle electronics, this is a deeply emotive and elegiac work. **CG**

FINLAY SHAKESPEARE

Illusion + Memory

ALTER

Based in Bristol, musician and producer Finlay Shakespeare continues his explorations into the peripheries of electronic pop with this latest full-length release. A fine album it is, too. Its clean, invigorating sound is blatantly influenced by the likes of Depeche Mode and Blancmange, but the punchy originality of tracks like 'Theresa' prove that Shakespeare is more than capable of putting his own emotive twist on a sound that many have tried to emulate and refine over the years. It's stimulating stuff. **IB**

JAMES ELLIS FORD

The Hum

WARP

Now this is a surprise. James Ford – superproducer and one half of Simian Mobile Disco – has crafted his debut solo release as an homage to the dreamy, pastoral prog of the mid-1970s. Think Canterbury, Wyatt and especially pre-ambient Eno. 'Emptiness', which mixes icy synths and piano, and the wistful 'Closing Time' could have both fitted snugly onto 'Another Green World', while 'Golden Hour' harks back to SMD's own original psyche-y incarnation. Ford sings for the first time and his soft untutored burr is a quiet delight. Much like the whole of this beguiling, beautiful album. **WS**

POST COAL PROM QUEEN – PHOTO: JOHN FARRELL

POST COAL PROM QUEEN
Music For First Contact
BANDCAMP

'Music For First Contact' was originally designed by this Scottish duo as the soundtrack to a live "referendum" show where the audience votes on whether humanity should respond to messages from aliens. Spanning several galaxies of sound, it moves from spaced-out operatic grandeur ('See Red Peace') all the way to icy dance-pop ('From Glasgow To Mars' and 'Sapere Aude'). The best stuff is where the genres fold into each other, as on 'Daylight On Deimos', where violins and saxophones flutter over impressionist singing and low-key echoing effects and. **BW**

SUSU LAROCHE
Closer To The Thing That Fled
ACCIDENTAL MEETINGS

This is a dark and stirring album from French-Egyptian artist Susu Laroche, that entangles Arabic dabke music with English lyrics gleaned from Persian poetry. Laroche instils each piece with a heavy and gothic energy. The titular track explodes into a flurry of percussion and deep, groaning, string-like synths towards the end, while 'The Gebbeths Way', inspired by Ursula K Le Guin's 'Earthsea' novels, is shrouded in shadow and mystique. **FH**

THE ALL GOLDEN
Yestereven
WOODFORD HALSE

Apparently contemplating the "end times", Wearside polymath Pete Gofton has made an elegantly melancholic album. 'Dogon' is a Beatles-esque homage to the prophecies of these indigenous Malian stargazers, 'Yer Wings' a Pink Floyd-ish exploration of the conspiracy theories (secret bunkers, lizard people) surrounding Denver airport, and 'The Mandate Of The Kingdom Of Heaven' is surely the funkiest-ever interpretation of metaphysical political philosophy from imperialist-era China. Building songs from his own 1990s demos, Gofton finds hope and beauty amid maelstroms of oddness. **BF**

MURMER
Tether
THE HELEN SCARSDALE AGENCY

'Tether', the latest release from composer Patrick McGinley, uses recordings of a phone mast near his home in Estonia, an electric sheep fence in Scotland, and a beer cooler from a North London pub that he worked at in 1999. By manipulating and fusing these diverse sounds, he creates rich, industrial-tinged soundscapes that are full of minute detail. 'Taevest', the most dramatic of the two long-form pieces here, becomes a brilliant cacophonous assemblage of atypical rhythmic sounds from about seven minutes in. Wonderfully untethered, despite what the title implies. **MS**

OVERMONO
Good Lies
XL RECORDINGS

Arising from the forested serenity of Wales' Wye Valley comes this stunning debut from brothers Truss and Tessela. Melding their twin passions of techno and dubstep, we have angelic garage with stadium-sized wings, candy-sweet vocals soaring then drowning and, at one point, an acid bass the size of Mount Snowdon. The breakthrough track, 'So U Kno', is a snappy banger – one among many. Electric and emotional throughout, this is Burial resurrected, Bicep with biceps, an even more Joyous Orbison. Essential listening. **FR**

AUTOBAHN
Ecstasy Of Ruin
TOUGH LOVE

This Leeds four-piece certainly wear their influences on their sleeve. There's that name for starters. The scything, distorted guitars and juddering drum machine suggests time spent ingesting '20 Jazz Funk Greats'. The Factory influence looms large too – the album was even recorded with equipment salvaged from Martin Hannett's studio, and on tracks like 'Tension' and 'Acid Child' frontman Craig Johnson resembles an angrier Ian Curtis. Down a coalmine. That they're obviously upfront about all this is to be commended, though older listeners may justly feel they've heard something similar before. **WS**

TREES SPEAK
Mind Maze
SOUL JAZZ

Arizona's Trees Speak (Daniel Martin Diaz and Damian Diaz) release albums at a rate of knots – 'Mind Maze' is their fifth long-player in the last two years. Quite the melting pot it is too, as the duo dip into a thrillingly eclectic melange of instrumental sounds. Think 1970s German electronica and krautrock (Can, Popol Vuh, Cluster), plus John Barry, John Carpenter, Suicide and New York post-punk/no wave, shot through with lashings of psych and prog. It's all killer, but try the Add N To (X)-ish synth-buzz wig-out of 'Syndrome' for starters. Intoxicatingly good. **VI**

NUNO REBELO
Improvisações Cristalizadas
HOLUZAM

After leaving the world of 1980s rock behind, Nuno Rebelo has fully immersed himself in the Portuguese musical underground. 'Improvisações Cristalizadas' surveys improvised computer works created in 1989 and 1990, and finds Rebelo in a playful, inquisitive frame of mind. The episodic electronics of 'Natty Cat' sound like a sonic sketch designed for a cartoon, while 'Hunangry' teeters on the edge of messy disarray, its forceful piano motif resting precariously on a bed of unpredictable squiggles and sporadic percussion. Fun times on the electronic frontier. **MS**

TERR
Consciousness As A State Of Matter
PHANTASY SOUND

Where the lyrics of last year's single 'Only For Tonight' detailed casual hook-ups and one night stands, the track's electropop stylings also suggested Terr was up for a bit of fun away from the deep house and cosmic disco to which she was previously faithful. On her debut album, the Berlin-based Brazilian artist continues to incorporate further flirtations with the likes of Donna Summer and Ladytron. But there are plenty of techno and acid-flecked grooves, such as 'Warp Drive', meaning fans of her earlier dancefloor-focused 12-inch records will find plenty to love here too. **PC**

HENGE
Alpha Test 4
COSMIC DROSS

"With each record, we have sought to fine-tune our extraterrestrial sounds for human ears," say Henge. On their third album, intergalactic proggers Zpor, Goo, Grok and Nom are concerned about the climate crisis. "It will not be long before the ice melts and the gas escapes / The tipping point is coming, humans," gasps Zpor on the breakneck single 'Get A Wiggle On'. But fine-tuning? Don't fret. The beats are a little slicker and tighter, but essentially they still sound like the Cardiacs and Gong fighting over the 'Pac-Man' machine at a happy hardcore club. Cosmic. **BF**

GRANDBROTHERS
Late Reflections
CITY SLANG

Erol Sarp and Lukas Vogel, the German-Turkish pianist and Swiss sound engineer who are Grandbrothers, have made their grandest album yet. Certainly the setting for their fourth long-player was unique – the pair were asked to perform at Cologne's magnificent Gothic cathedral to mark 700 years since the consecration of the eastern part of the church. Given access after dark, they recorded tracks for 'Late Reflections' – such as the beatific 'Adrift' – in the middle of the night, with everything coming from Sarp's piano and Vogel then manipulating the sounds enhanced by the edifice's stunning reverberations. Awe-inspiring. **JA**

FLOCK
In C
STRUT

This collaborative act is made up of members of the UK's burgeoning experimental nu-jazz scene, who, as the album title suggests, riff on the groundbreaking minimalism of Terry Riley's seminal 1960s work. Luminaries including Sarathy Korwar, Bex Burch and The Comet Is Coming's Danalogue introduce an array of spectacular kaleidoscopic textures while staying brilliantly faithful to the original. Subcontinental percussion, sun-infused woodwind and impressively accomplished syncopation race along with blinding musicianship throughout, as on the 17 minutes of 'In C (Full Length Version)', which is a particular joy to behold. **CG**

MATTHEWDAVID – PHOTO: SAM LEE

MATTHEWDAVID
Mycelium Music
LEAVING

Tapping into the burgeoning cultural love for fungi, American producer, DJ and Leaving Records founder MatthewDavid shares a glistening harvest filled with abstract synth works of unparalleled beauty. An early highlight ,'Liquidity' evokes the harp-like tumbling melodies of the most spiritually healing compositions by Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith or Visible Cloaks. The likes of 'Grain' and 'X' dig deeper into the dirt – a little less bright, perhaps, but the colour gradient is still full of fractal complexity and organic power. **FH**

KYRON
Dreaming Eden
BELBURY MUSIC

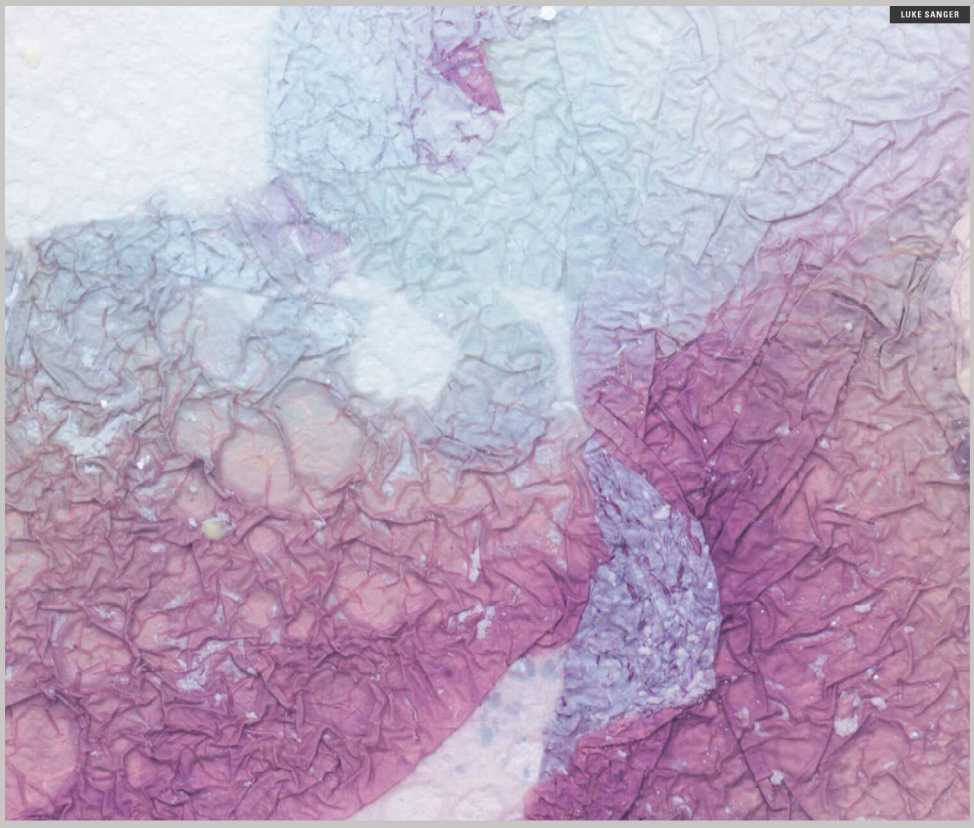
Portugal's João Branco Kyron, the Beautify Junkyards and Hidden Horse frontman, delivers his third solo album, and it's probably his best yet. Following 2021's occult literature-inspired 'Ascending Plume Of Faces', this long-player also takes its cue from the written word, this time Christopher Priest's prescient 1970s sci-fi novel 'A Dream Of Wessex'. Here, Kyron balances floating, melodic psychedelia with cosmic, library-ish and retro-futurist electronics. They come together with ambivalent, hallucinatory perfection on standout tracks like the gripping 'Tidal Pulsations' or the gently transportive 'Slipstream Of Memory'. Recommended. **CG**

ANDROO
Club Salon Theatre
MUSIC FROM MEMORY

Rooted in improv, Geneva's Androo really mixes it on this 23-track debut album, a delightful sonic collage that playfully and imaginatively skitters across fragments of dub, musique concrète, jazz and trap. Exquisitely delicate, immersive and ever-so-slightly woozy, these patchworks shimmer in their own idiosyncratic nonchalance, as on the gloriously disjointed piano and clatter of 'Autonomia', or the sublimely mellow, summery drift of 'Obsessions. Étoiles. Neurones', which makes you yearn for warmer days, sitting out, just watching the world go by. Utterly gorgeous. **VI**

OZMOTIC / FENNESZ
Senzatempo
TOUCH

In one intensely productive session in Turin, Italian electronic wizards OZMOTIC and Austrian guitarist Christian Fennesz birthed the majority of 'Senzatempo'. The opening title track sets the tone for the album – synths swell with majestic, restrained power then Fennesz glides in, a shark fin piercing the waves, before the whole thing erupts into an overdriven, reverbed-to-hell beast. With distinct, yet utterly complementary sound palettes, on the likes of 'Floating Time', OZMOTIC and Fennesz have forged unique soundscapes that are by turns graceful and epic. **AT**



LUKE SANGER
Salt Water Motifs
QUIET DETAILS

The latest Quiet Details release continues the label's premise of having sound artists respond to the imprint's name. Sanger's album is an exercise in subtlety, a far cry from some of the techno bangers he's best known for. The whistling tones and redacted bass pulse of 'Sentiment' are soft and enveloping, yet ever-so-slightly warped at the edges, introducing a sense of realism and uncertainty, while the plucked melody of 'Harbourside' unravels gently above the ebb and flow of shoreline sounds. Delicate and hopeful. **MS**

CEL
Gegenwelt
BUREAU B

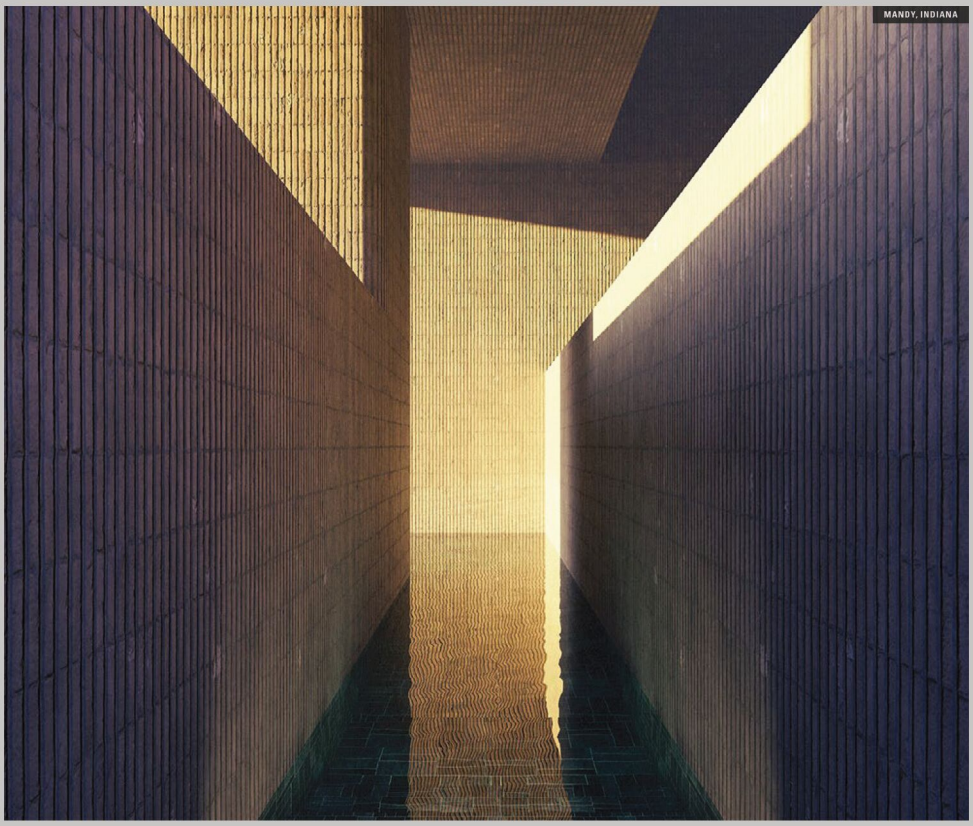
Felix Kubin and Hubert Zemler's second album under the collective moniker of CEL is inspired by the propulsive motorik of Can and the hallucinatory brain loops of Der Plan. On 'Tokamak' and the cinematically noir-ish title track, Warsaw-based Zemler provides irrepressible percussion while Hamburg luminary Kubin masterminds melodically enriching soundscapes of playful noise. 'Gegenwelt' translates as 'Parallel World' and, in another topsy-turvy sphere of existence, CEL are probably bigger than BTS. What's more, fans of spacey abstract chaos should definitely hang around for 'Transformator Matki Polki' at the end. **JA**

MARK BARROTT
Jōhatsu (蒸発)
REFLECTIONS

The boss of the Balearic beat revival brings an album full of absence. Named for the missing people of Japan, 'Jōhatsu' was written for a documentary that has never seen the light of day. Yes, 'Kill All Ghosts' spirals into eddies of synth wibbles, while the delirious drums of 'Yonige-Ya' add zest to the zen. Yet these jazzy ambient shuffles are about disappearance in theme and sound. The spaces between languid piano notes say – or don't say – it all. **FR**

UH
Humanus
PRAH RECORDINGS

At every turn, the debut album from London siblings Dominic and Fionnuala Kennedy surprises and delights. Yes, there are elements of Boards Of Canada-style pastoralism, acid house and folk in its DNA, but Uh revel in throwing left-hand turns. The title track could be an early 1990s rave hit, but then breaks down as stuttering spoken words whirl. 'Attention' switches time signature midway. 'Comfortable' juxtaposes a soaring vocal against a lolloping reggae tempo. Their approach is playful rather than calculating, shunning easy options and genre constraints. It reminds you of the promise that's implicit in all great music – freedom. **WS**



MANDY, INDIANA

I've Seen A Way

FIRE TALK

There's noise in them there hills and Mandy, Indiana (from Manchester, geography fans) are in the extraction business, recording in caves, crypts and shopping centres in search of novel acoustics. The epic opener 'Love Theme (4K VHS)' and its arpeggiating synths give way to the austere 'Drag [Crashed]', which has the warehouse cool of Factory Floor fronted by the fierce French vocals of Valentine Caulfield. 'Pinking Shears' recalls the remorselessness of prime Swans or Slab! but is eminently danceable. In the 80s, they'd have had a headline-grabbing residency at the ICA, for sure. **MR**

AUS

Everis

LO RECORDINGS

Renowned Tokyo composer and producer Yasuhiko Fukuzono, aka Aus, brings us a mesmerising collage of sound and texture. It's an album that turned the adversity of a home studio burglary, which saw the artist lose his entire catalogue, into a triumph of instinctive creativity. Encompassing ideas from disparate sources, including spiritual jazz, neoclassical, avant-garde and folk, he also weaves in found sounds, classical instrumentation, field recordings and soft electronics. Standout tracks like 'Past From' and 'Make Me Me' work like magical paeans to lost memories and transient dreams. **CG**

SBTRKT

The Rat Road

AWAL RECORDINGS

Always a difficult producer to pin down, Aaron Jerome's first album in seven years is a 22-track pick 'n' mix that glides deftly between different styles and genres. One minute it's Flying Lotus-style electronica ('Don't Let'), the next it's a broken beat duet between Sampha and George Riley ('LFO'). There's no shortage of good ideas here, but with an overload of interludes and bite-sized, sub-three-minute tracks, it's a pity more were not developed further. A touch insubstantial at times, certainly, but 'The Rat Road' is still a fascinating comeback statement. **WS**

SYNTHETIC VILLAINS

Hidden Camera Syndrome

FLOOD OF SOUND RECORDINGS

"I often used to feel like a hidden camera… viewing the world I lived in as a non-participatory observer," says Richard J Turner of an adolescence spent in Preston, eschewing Tokyo Jo's nightclub for the musings of Albert Camus. As Synthetic Villains, his latest effort perfectly captures this feeling of neutral detachment. The seven-minute title track builds pulsing, Berlin School synths up to panic-attack levels of breathlessness, and the hypnotic buzzsaw rhythms of 'Circular Forms' make up perhaps one of the finest-ever musical evocations of brain-freezing anxiety. Heartfelt and affecting. **BF**

JOAQUÍN ORELLANA

JOAQUÍN ORELLANA
Sacratávica
IDENTIDATA

Guatemalan composer Joaquín Orellana is experiencing something of a renaissance at the age of 85, with many of his pioneering works, intersecting the worlds of sound, sculpture, spirituality and theatre, now becoming available for the first time. Abstract pieces like 'Ramajes De Una Marimba Imaginaria' have until now been more likely performed live or used in museum installations, so 'Sacratávica' brings Orellana's quixotic, life-affirming, avant-garde soundscapes to a wider audience not a moment too soon. This collection of music and spoken word really focuses the senses. **JA**

DAVID TOOP
Pink Spirit, Noir World
FOAM ON A WAVE

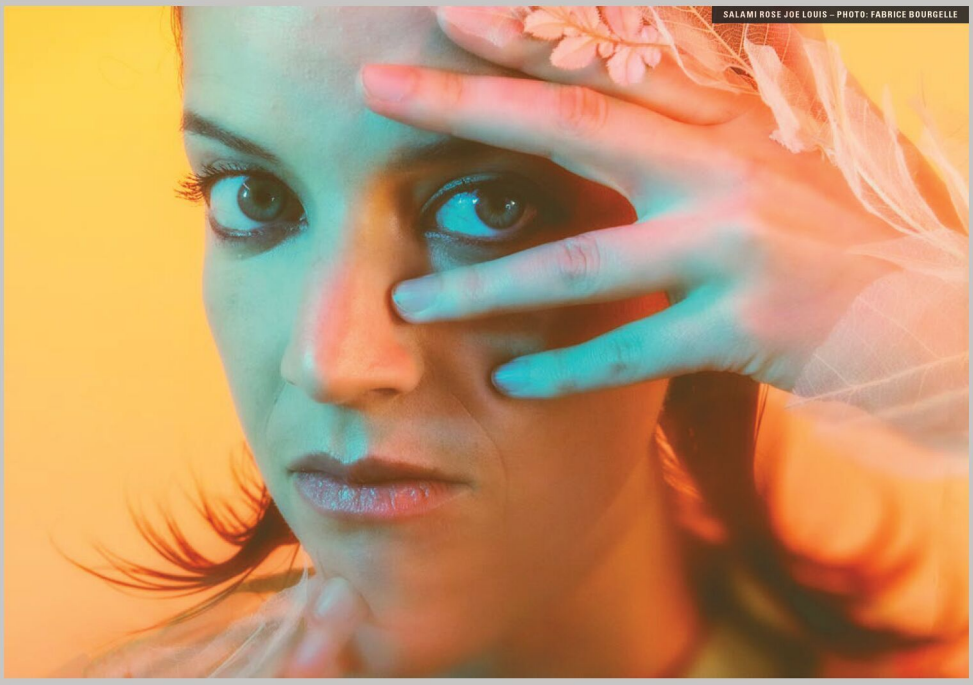
This is a neat amalgamation of Foam On A Wave's favourite tracks from David Toop's Virgin albums, forming a properly coherent collection of the experimental musician, Flying Lizards member and author's sonic adventures. Toop is known for sourcing ambient sounds from diverse global traditions. From 'Aether Talk', where birdsong and cricket-chirping meet echo chambers and tape manipulation, to the reggae poetry of 'Mamba Point', it's ambitious and varied throughout. There are many moments of sublime musical joy, not least the subtly dubby 'Sunless' and Jon Hassell's orgasmic contributions to 'Slow Loris Versus Poison Snail'. **BW**

O YUKI CONJUGATE
A Tension Of Opposites Vols 3 & 4
OYC LIMITED

Nottingham's finest purveyors of post-industrial soundscapes are back with another instalment of their 'A Tension Of Opposites' works, following last year's 'Vols 1 & 2'. It's a cracking collection of Roger Horberry and Andrew Hulme's self-described "dirty ambient" tracks, with the slow-moving shudder of the opener, 'Deep Head Scene', and the crackle and blown-out bass of 'Hidden Cities' establishing a hypnotic groove that never wavers across the 16 pieces. An extremely enjoyable, immersive, settle-in-and-zone-out kind of affair. **CF**

THE CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY CONSORTIUM
Panoramic Coloursound
DARK ENTRIES

Taking their cue from old-school film and TV themes, and with a considerable armoury of vintage synths and drum machines at their disposal, Chicago's Creative Technology Consortium (Traxx, Andrew Bisenius and Jason Letkiewicz) forge their own retro-futurist soundscape to "heists, vices and catastrophe". Imminent threat or danger lurks around every corner. Imagine John Carpenter, Logic System and the Cabs scoring a dark, claustrophobic 1980s sci-fi flick – as on the burbling robo-funk of 'Catastrophe' – and you're halfway close. A crepuscular treat. **VI**



SALAMI ROSE JOE LOUIS – PHOTO: FABRICE BOURGELLE

SALAMI ROSE JOE LOUIS

Akousmatikous

BRAINFEEDER

Lindsay Olsen's first two albums for Brainfeeder were concept jobs that detailed a future dystopia circa 2080. On her third effort, the Bay Area producer and ex-climate scientist has dropped the cosmic concerns and focused on the music, which remains stunning. Certainly, the opening title track is a sumptuous, multi-part collab with Soccer96, complete with galloping percussion, sighing strings and Olsen's swoonsome vocals.

After that, she gets down to business with lashings of soft electric piano cradling her sugary cooing. There's a woozy, narcotic quality to this music, especially on the likes of 'Propaganda' featuring Oakland dance duo Brijean. After a few tracks, it's hard not to fall under its dreamy spell, lingering in the heat haze until you feel slightly dazed. The beats are still as irregular as you'd expect from a Brainfeeder release – 'Gradients' and 'Zee Complex' lollop around on impossibly complex time signatures.

Few of the 16 tracks here outstay the three-minute mark – like a honey bee, Olsen flits from track to track before moving on. But what she produces is deliciously sweet, succulent and warmly seductive. **WS**

ROGER ENO

Rarities

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

'Rarities' is the companion album to 2022's 'The Turning Year'. Containing new tracks and alternative versions of pieces from that work, this collection offers new insights into Roger Eno's compositional style. A grand piano performance of the title track takes on austere grandiosity as he wordlessly reflects on the ceaseless passing of time. Eno's delivery of its central melody is comforting and reassuring, despite the terrifying speed at which years go by.

A new piece, 'Moving Chords', is pretty and brittle, full of Eno's trademark vast, evocative silences between inquisitive notes, where there are no answers to be found – just more big, unresolvable questions.

When I spoke to Eno last year, we talked at length about family and how we had watched as our children grew up imperceptibly in front of us. Appropriately enough, his two daughters, Cecily and Lotti, appear on a new version of 'Bells'. The haunting track is a stirring, plaintive and utterly heart-wrenching conclusion. Beautiful and emotionally devastating. **MS**

THE LEISURE FOUNDATION

The Leisure Foundation

MEMORY DANCE

The alternative British music scene flourished in the early 1980s – a time when it seemed as though everyone and their dog was forming a band. While a few of these acts found major success, most were destined to remain confined to the realms of history, having perhaps recorded some demos, played some gigs, then called it a day. Sheffield's The Leisure Foundation was one such band, attracting some interest following a number of notable live appearances, before quietly dissolving.

Now, reissue label Memory Dance are releasing an eight-track compilation of the group's work in a bid to showcase their distinctive sound, which encompasses synthpop, disco, funk and dub, often all at once.

"The history of Sheffield music during this period is well documented, but few know of The Leisure Foundation," the album's accompanying notes boldly declare. "This release promises to change that." Listening to standout tracks like the understated cool of 'Free' or the engaging 'Total Control', and wondering just why The Leisure Foundation didn't hit the big time, you feel inclined to believe them. **IB**

UNE

Whirl

SPUN OUT OF CONTROL

What goes around comes around. That's certainly the case on this fourth album from radio behemoth Mark Radcliffe and Haçienda scenester Paul S Langley. Previous UNE concept albums have paid homage to foreign language words with no English equivalent and, most recently, the haunting qualities of post-war Balkan brutalism. 'Whirl' takes inspiration from, quite simply, things that spin around, from the planet Mercury to the legendary whirling dervishes of the Sufi religion.

Opening track 'Molengang' sets a charming precedent. The Dutch word for collected windmills, it marries the reassuring clank of rotating sails to grin-inducing Kraftwerk synths. "I'm pacified in cruise control / The sails go round to soothe the soul," sings Radcliffe, his vocals throughout providing comforting stillness on an album with its own sense of perpetual motion. Tracks are segued seamlessly, through the soft music boxes of 'Dervish' to the motorik beats of 'Twisted', the tale of an apologetic tropical storm. Heartwarming, melodic and oddly moving, it's an album that's resolutely worth a spin. **BF**

MODERN COSMOLOGY

What Will You Grow Now?

DUOPHONIC SUPER 45S

As an outfit comprising French Stereolab legend Lætitia Sadier and members of Brazilian band Mombojó, Modern Cosmology are a very modern and cosmic proposition. Modern in the sense that the music they make together is played on different continents and then assembled virtually. And cosmic, as in spacey and imbued with groove, mixing up Afro-Brazilian beats, slabs of unfettered electronica, and capped-off with existential lyrics.

Sadier's voice is redolent of a mournful wind instrument practising scales in lieu of any glaring choruses, especially on the opener, 'Making Something'. The dispassionate delivery over these warm, rumbling grooves makes for a charming juxtaposition. Sadier's insurrectionist words touch upon the personal on 'Le Train Ne Passera Pas' and critique the patriarchy on 'Trauma Release Makes Free', but she is at her most stark and manifesto-like on the imposing title track.

Back home in Pernambuco, Brazil, Mombojó are a big deal, and while London-based Sadier continues to embrace collaborations in a riveting ongoing journey, this is possibly the most inspired thing she's been involved in since Stereolab were still recording. **JA**

RICHIE CULVER

I Was Born By The Sea (The Remixes)

PARTICIPANT

Although the influence of Throbbing Gristle is apparent in his avant-garde electronics, another former inhabitant of Richie Culver's home city of Hull also looms large in this visual artist turned music producer's work. Lyrics such as "Let our love grow like an abscess" could come straight from Philip Larkin's poetry, and have an equally painful but compelling quality when delivered in Culver's doleful tones. They also formed an essential human heart to the otherwise alien soundscapes of last year's astounding 'I Was Born By The Sea' album.

That many of the artists here either radically reduce or utterly erase Culver's vocals makes this collection of remixes a more impressionistic affair, yet the sense of ennui is preserved throughout. That's most obvious in the drifting expanse of Space Afrika's version of 'Hard To Get To Know You' or the creeping ambient dread Teresa Winter brings to 'Nervous Energy', but even fellow Humbersiders Fila Brazillia's remix of the title track has an uneasy undercurrent beneath the lapping waves of their usual dubby funk. **PC**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Ecuatoriana – El Universo Paralelo De Polibio Mayorga 1969-1981

ANALOG AFRICA

Just when you thought there was nothing left to discover on the ahead-of-its-time, non-western analogue synth front, along comes this wonderfully obscure collection from Ecuador, courtesy of German audio-archaeologists Analog Africa (with their excellent tagline, "The Future Of Music Happened Decades Ago").

It's a compilation that tells the story of an explosion of tropical space-age sounds, rooted in the migration of rural people to the big city of Quito and the burgeoning commercial port of Guayaquil. The musicians were ambitious, hoping to break into a music industry that centred at the time around prestigious urban radio stations, where the country's rich traditional folk heritage met with the latest 1960s electronic gear, early Moogs among them, all amid a national UFO craze.

So here we have an abundance of quirky-sounding primitive synths, on tracks like 'Mi Paisa' by Olmedo Torres Y Polibio Mayorga. Often joyfully idiosyncratic, as with Conjunto La Jorga's 'La Perra Vida', the electronics also blend beguilingly with the ancient ancestral rhythms of Ecuador into a sound that would become known as the Andean Cumbia. Salud! **CG**

THE ORB

Prism

COOKING VINYL

Three decades after they alerted us all to the limitless possibilities offered by sampling, invented ambient house and became the post-club soundtrack of choice for a generation of ravers, The Orb are still here. And they're still putting out quality albums. 'Prism' is a case in point. It's still unmistakably them, with Alex Paterson's quirky humour and intriguing sonic collages front and centre, but there are confident advances in their sonic palette too.

'Why Can You Be In Two Places At Once When You Can't Be Anywhere At All' sees them go disco with fizzing hi-hats and a funk bassline. 'A Ghetto Love Story' is the full-on pop reggae track they've long threatened to do. And the single, 'Living In Recycled Times', is a drum 'n' bass roller as good as anything from the scene's golden era.

'Prism' is accessible, fun, and will surprise anyone whose assumptions about The Orb are stuck in the 1990s. If you jumped off the bus years ago, now is the time to climb back on. **WS**

CATE BROOKS

Tapeworks

CAFE KAPUT

Never underestimate the power of a good haggle. In 1998, Cate Brooks' partner struck a hard bargain over a 1960s reel-to-reel tape recorder gathering dust in a Lowestoft junk shop, and this charming gadget has been Brooks' faithful studio companion ever since. 'Tapeworks' is a soothing homage to the affecting resonance of such vintage technology. With just a hint of melancholy too. Brooks admits she was keen to make the album quickly, while the clanking wheels of her now 60-year-old recorder were still just about turning. It's like gently probing the memories of an ailing, elderly relative.

There are six lengthy tracks here, all titled with Roman numerals. Eleven-minute opener 'I' sets the tone with tinkling synths and waves of ambience, while Goldfrapp collaborator Hazel Mills adds floating vocal loops to 'II' and 'V'. The mood is similar to Eno's chilled 1980s opus, 'Thursday Afternoon'. But really, the soft hiss of those ancient Sony tapes is the star, and the degraded fuzz of ancient stock becomes an extra instrument of touching plangency. Music for gazing out of windows. **BF**

FRED UND LUNA

Im Fünfminutentakt

COMPOST

Splendid fashion boutique electrokraut

Fred Und Luna are a pair of mannequins in a shop window in the town of Karlsruhe, Germany, where they serve as the motionless muses for one Rainer Büchmuller, a musician, poet, photographer and video-maker. If this is all sounding a bit 'Eurotrash', don't worry. The end result is a fun and finely wrought homage to German electronic music of the 1970s.

It comes across like a crackers thought experiment, as though replicating the contents of a cassette tape of lost Kling Klang demos in which Ralf and co have been exploring the pop potential of their machine music. From the organic sweetness of Side Two of 'Autobahn' to the clinical perfection of 'Computer World', with a bit of Cluster thrown in, channelled through the impassive showroom dummies themselves.

And so 'Nur Ein Viertelstündchen' and 'Aventüre 1' float around the pastoral beauty of early Kraftwerk, while also echoing the gentle side of Neu! and Cluster's magical appeal. 'Tanz Mit Mir', meanwhile, moves towards the regimented and robotic, into 'The Man-Machine' and 'Schaufensterpuppen' neck of the laboratory.

By the time 'Eins Null Eins Eins Null' rolls up (numbers!) you get the impression that Fred Und Luna are almost willing a new Kraftwerk album into existence. It's only amplified by 'Wir Atmen Digital' with its 8-bit intonations and electro-clave rhythms dancing across the stereo field.

'Im Fünfminutentakt' strays from its Kraftwerk brief enough to keep it varied and not too monomaniacal – see 'Es Ist So Schön' with its schlager girl/boy vocals, while the piano piece 'Sommer' has Roedelius all over it. 'Morgen', another pastoral moment, is like an electronic U2 doing 'With Or Without You', with the added advantage of not being U2.

Büchmuller has coined a couple of new sub-genres to describe his work – elektrokraut and krautelektro, and this is the fourth Fred Und Luna album. By taking Kraftwerk and their 1970s underground contemporaries as the blueprint, he's been able to parlay it into an extended aesthetic output with its own appeal. He's used the band's titanium frame and dressed it in different fashions. It might need a metal pole up its arse to stay upright, but it does stand up on its own, and looks great too.

MARK ROLAND

Brief Encounters

Fred Und Luna, aka **Rainer Buchmüller**, takes on this month's round of quick-fire questions

Hello Rainer, where are you right now and what can you see?
"I am looking out of a big window with a view of my garden. It's a sunny spring afternoon, a perfect background for our conversation, and to later on write a musical piece with Fred Und Luna on my mind."

So Fred and Luna are your muses?
"A very good definition. They have become a major influence on my musical life and have been my main inspiration since I first met them some years ago."

And they're mannequins living in a fashion boutique in Karlsruhe?
"For most people they are showroom dummies, yes. But for me they are more than that, they have a secret human touch."

What sort of shop is it?
"It's a classical kind of boutique, founded in 1899. In Germany we call it 'Modehaus'. I shop there from time to time. Recently I bought some Bavarian Lederhosen with matching shoes, socks, shirt and jacket."

Would I like it?
"Yes, why not?"

Your other inspiration, of course, is German electronic music...
"It has always been very special and, for me as a German, has always sounded very familiar, up-to-date and futuristic."

This is your fourth album. You've called it 'Im Fünfminutentakt'?
"'Im Fünfminutentakt' means 'every five minutes'."

If it's your fourth album, why aren't the tracks four minutes long?
"Ha-ha, good question! You should have asked that before I came up with the five minute idea. That would have made two more songs on the album."

'Es Ist So Schön' is sung in three languages. Is krautrock an international language?
"Nowadays, definitely. In the 1970s it was different. Many German bands were smiled about in other countries, but thanks to the timeless music of bands like Can, Kraftwerk or Tangerine Dream, the reputation of krautrock grew all over the world and made German electronic music an international language."

Live, you represent Fred, but Luna is always different. How does that work?
"Before each concert, Luna is spontaneously chosen from local musicians – musicians who play at the same festival, friends, someone from the audience or someone I met in the streets that afternoon. This makes every show a unique surprise for me... and for the audience."

Has Luna ever been played by a man?
"Yes, very often. Luna is not limited to a female character. In French 'la lune' is feminine, in German 'der Mond' is masculine."

Can we send the editor of Electronic Sound along next time you play? He'd make a super Luna!
"This is a great idea. I invite him to join and am very much looking forward to see and hear what instrument he comes up with."

Buried Treasure

I START COUNTING

My Translucent Hands

MUTE, 1986

Of the various musical guises assumed by David Baker and Simon Leonard, it was arguably their first – I Start Counting – which saw them at their most multifarious. Their later projects, Fortran 5 and Komputer, valiantly presented spaced-out dance music and heavily Kraftwerk-influenced electro respectively. But as I Start Counting, the duo moulded bright, full-bodied synthesisers and a deadpan, tongue-in-cheek delivery with eerie spoken word samples, and in doing so they created a small but compelling bank of refreshingly eclectic material.

Native Londoners Baker and Leonard met at Middlesex University in the early 1980s and bonded over their shared love of DJing and pop music. They were signed to Mute Records in 1984 on the strength of their demos, and after releasing two singles produced by label boss Daniel Miller, the duo's debut long-player, 'My Translucent Hands', eventually surfaced in 1986 as a mini-album on both CD and vinyl.

Admittedly, the record's heavy use of archetypal mid-80s production means it hasn't stood the test of time quite as well as it could have. Despite this (and as its slightly odd title suggests), 'My Translucent Hands' is not your run-of-the-mill synthpop release – something you would have discovered in 1986 as soon as you hit play on your CD player or touched the needle to the vinyl (which in some rather quaint cases was translucent).

The opening track, 'Introduction', is less a song and more a three-minute escalation of energy, morphing and contorting until it reaches a state of mesmeric intensity. At the other end of the scale, there's the single 'Letters To A Friend', which appeared only on the CD. A more wistful, tender track, it cleverly weaves the tale of a man who's sure the letters his partner writes in secret are intended for her lover, only to have his suspicions confirmed when she leaves him, promising that she'll write to him by way of reconciliation.

When these two extremes come together – particularly on tracks such as 'You And I', 'Lose Him' and 'Which Way Is Home?' with their restless synth grooves, collage-like arrangements and witty lyrics – 'My Translucent Hands' are at their finest and Baker and Leonard at their most distinctive.

Moments like these serve to establish the duo as a force to be reckoned with when it comes to making intriguing, unpredictable electronic music that still retains a level of mainstream appeal. Although they never reached the commercial heights of some of their Mute contemporaries like Depeche Mode or Erasure (who they supported on tour in 1987), their work will continue to be shared, sought-out and loved – under whatever guise it was recorded.

IMOGEN BEBB

CLARK

Sus Dog

THROTTLE

Electronic mainstay shows off vocal chops

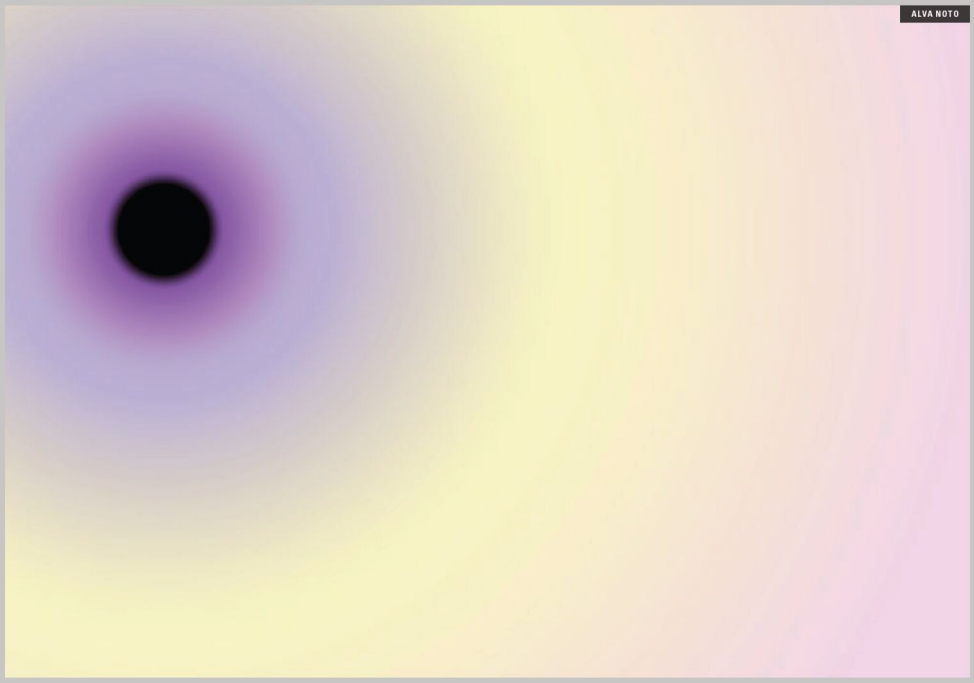
It's easy to see why Thom Yorke replied with an eager "yes" when Chris Clark wrote to him asking for advice about writing lyrics and singing. Classic Clark albums like 2006's 'Body Riddle' are the sort of uncompromisingly knotty electronica Yorke has been enthused about since 'Kid A'. Plus, this was a chance for Yorke to mentor a bona fide Warp artist rather than simply sing on some tracks, as he'd done previously for Flying Lotus and Modeselektor. Yet the Radiohead frontman's role as executive producer on Clark's latest album begs another question. Namely, if Yorke has long been trying to make records that sound like Clark, will 'Sus Dog' be Clark trying to sound like Yorke?

The answer is a resounding "no". It only takes until the moment the opening track, 'Alyosha', explodes with rave fireworks to reassure you that Clark hasn't become a Radiohead tribute act. The distorted stomp of 'Town Crank' resembles the more frenzied moments of 2017's 'Death Peak'. And the first half of 'Sus Dog' has plenty of other touchpoints to Clark's earlier output – the title track nods towards 2012's trip hop-tinged 'Iradelphic', while the piano motif of 'Over Empty Streets' would fit happily into any of his TV soundtrack work.

Of course, we already know nobody could teach Clark new production tricks, yet what about the lyrics and singing he wanted a hand with? Clark shares a falsetto pitch with Yorke, but clearly wasn't under instruction to sound as if his voice is breaking with the weight of the world. Rather, his vocals recall Animal Collective as much as anyone else, with enigmatic lyrics like "Obscured by a street light in the rain" or "How you talk to yourself when you're alone" surfacing amid the blurry multi-tracked swell.

Foggy as the sonics sometimes are, there's a real sense of light in many of these songs, and not just thanks to the sunny synthpop swirl of 'Dismissive'. Even the darker and more downbeat 'Bully' ends with an ascension of glittering pads while Clark muses, "Fickle love / I see you coming and going / Like the tide". By which point, you're no longer asking whether his first foray into songwriting has been a success, but are instead wondering why he's kept this talent hidden for so long.

PAUL CLARKE



ALVA NOTO
Kinder Der Sonne
NOTON

This is Noto's first soundtrack work since 'The Revenant', produced in 2015 with the sorely missed Ryuichi Sakamoto. Unlike the DiCaprio film, there are no marauding bears here. It begins as an expert study in crystalline composure. Smoke rings of gently keyed organ notes drift over almost imperceptible audio glitches. Glasses clink, melodies haze, frequencies linger.

The serene cycles seem to belie the album's source material, Simon Stone's 'Komplizen', a shouty theatre piece about the fall of the bourgeoisie, itself adapted from Maxim Gorky's cholera-era drama 'Children Of The Sun'. Yet, sure enough, darkness develops.

We go from the hesitant blips of 'Ungewiss' ('Uncertain') to the spiteful noise attack of 'Aufstand' ('Revolt'). It's a far cry from the minimal mood of the German producer's 'Xerrox' material. Snarling static lurches into slabs of growling bass, and the album's closing descent into hellish drones leaves us wishing we'd taken our chances with the bear. Truly dramatic. **FR**

BRITISH ELECTRIC FOUNDATION
Music For Stowaways
COLD SPRING

Formed by Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh after leaving The Human League, the British Electric Foundation production house had a futuristic vision for pop. Ironic then, that the debut BEF album is being reissued on vinyl, probably considered an obsolete format in 1981 compared to the cassette on which 'Music For Stowaways' first appeared.

"Stowaway" was the original name for the recently invented Walkman, but could also be interpreted as the pair's modus operandi – first smuggling experimental electronics into The Human League, and later subversive messaging into Heaven 17.

Released just prior to Heaven 17's 'Penthouse And Pavement', 'Music For Stowaways' includes an instrumental version of '(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang', but is an otherwise more abstract collage of angular electronics. Format aside, what really gives this re-release contemporary relevance is the fear of nuclear Armageddon that hangs over tracks like 'Decline Of The West' – one thing from the 1980s we're not happy to have back. **PC**

GENESIS P-ORRIDGE & THE HAFLER TRIO
Dream Less Suite
CORTIZONA

You could argue that expectations for 'Dream Less Suite' are a little on the high side. This album not only collects collaborative work by two of the UK's most notorious industrial pioneers in the form of "soundtracks to unfinished films, live performances and real versions of tracks you know and love", it's also the first album from The Hafler Trio since 2016.

If we've learned anything from these two artists over the years, however, it's that the formulaic and the predictable exist only to be shunned. With 'Dream Less Suite' they make light work of blowing any preconceptions out of the water using little more than skittish rhythms, ominous rattles, slashes of cut-throat guitar and Genesis P-Orridge's versatile voice, which is the only sound on deliciously oppressive tracks like 'Alaura (Yes)' and 'Slave Priest (Yes)'. Probably not one for your next family gathering but a gratifying and engrossing listen, all the same. **IB**

CARTER TAKES A TRAIN – PHOTO: DAVE GUTTRIDGE

CARTER TAKES A TRAIN

At The Edgeland Discotheque

BANDCAMP

Viva Great Yarmouth. Along with the neighbouring seaside towns of Gorleston and Lowestoft, we're talking the most easterly point of the UK, an area half in Norfolk, half in Suffolk, and all of it likely to be under the North Sea one day. Maybe soon.

Reg Ruse, aka Carter Takes A Train, a project named after the opening scene of the 1971 crime flick 'Get Carter', lives around these parts. Which may explain the peculiarities of 'At The Edgeland Discotheque', his second CTAT album. Bask in the palpable warmth of the sounds when you can, but be prepared for icy blasts out of nowhere too.

There's a dreamy quality to most of the tracks, especially 'Off World Holiday' and 'Swimming In The Long Tide', the latter featuring some champion clarinet work by Andy Butler. A gold star to Polly Wright for 'Ten Billion Stars' as well, reciting mad stats – "One billion guns, 46 per cent in the US" – over a hypnotic pulse. And then there's the slo-mo waltzer ride of 'Night Drive To The Rendezvous'. Don't scream or Reg Ruse will spin you harder.

Intoxicating and invigorating and breathtaking, you're going to fall in love with 'At The Edgeland Discotheque'. Head over heels. You will be needing your coat, though. **P**

THE BLACK DOG

The Grey Album

DUST SCIENCE RECORDINGS

The Black Dog's best album for yonks harks back to their early career. Memories of making tunes on knackered synths in dusty Sheffield recording rooms hired for less than a quid a day. 'The Grey Album' blends their recent 'White' and 'Black' EPs, and utilises a restricted studio set-up as if it was the olden days. The results absolutely fly.

Highlights include 'Harder Times' in which a funky Hardfloor-esque bass cuts through rattling ambience. It's as elated as a band can be when its name is a metaphor for depression. 'Empire Statement Humanoid' has a bassline so bouncy, it's built from space hoppers. '(We Never Needed This) Fascist Groove Thang' sounds like God playing the organ. And 'I Dare You' is emotional and dramatic – picture Squarepusher on that Detroit People Mover. So many great moments. By eschewing the paranoia of recent work, they've let in chasms of light. Grey, murky, knackered light, but light nonetheless. **FR**

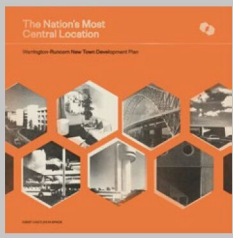
VARIOUS ARTISTS

Music Is Vast: A Tribute To The Music And Legacy Of Vangelis

CASTLES IN SPACE

Which death of a musical legend has hit you the hardest? Was it David Bowie? Prince, maybe? For Castles in Space head honcho Colin Morrison, it was the passing of Vangelis last year, and after some time spent thinking about how to honour his musical hero, a tribute album seemed to be the best way to go, with all proceeds from its sale on Bandcamp going to The Trussell Trust, a charity that aims to stop UK hunger and poverty. Submissions were thrown open on Twitter, and soon 'Music Is Vast' became a labour of love for Morrison as he sifted through a galaxy of cosmic tributes.

So here we have a staggering 69 tracks that capture the essence of the Greek synthesiser maestro. At times, it feels as though you're actually listening to Vangelis himself, especially the ambient, spacey 'Odysséas Ascending' by The British Stereo Collective, while 'Ordre Evasif Et Decision Inquieta' by French sonic maverick Bernard Grancher is a little more opaque but no less inspired. It's mind-blowing to consider how this expansive collection of music represents just a tiny fraction of all the people who were touched in some way by Vangelis' mighty work. **JA**



WARRINGTON-RUNCORN NEW TOWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Nation's Most Central Location

CASTLES IN SPACE

Urban planning electronica, gloves off

Town councillors from the 1970s sporting nylon shirts and comb-overs! Plummy-voiced promotional films promising jetpacks for all Skelmersdale residents by the year 1985! Until now, across three beautifully realised albums, Lancashire's Gordon Chapman-Fox has used the charmingly retro affectations of the 20th century New Town movement to lend his glacial synth workouts an air of knowing good humour.

But bubbling beneath it all has been an undercurrent of resentment. A deep-set frustration that these altruistic visions of a gleaming future for working-class Northerners were ultimately scuppered by wilful, managed decline and the inexorable rise of Thatcherism. On this, his excellent fourth outing for Castles In Space, the giggles are gone and Chapman-Fox sounds righteously pissed off.

Could you make a case for 2022's 'Districts, Roads, Open Space', with its airy, 13-minute explorations of suburban ennui, being the expansive Warrington-Runcorn prog rock album? If not quite 'Tales From Topographic Oceans' then at least 'Tales Of Tarporley And Oldham'? If so, then 'The Nation's Most Central Location' is the moment punk arrived in Keckwick.

Opener 'Just Off The M56 (Junction 12)' is a dark wedge of foreboding ambience, a rumble of incessant synth traffic on the slip road to Appleton Thorn. 'Rocksavage', named in honour of the gas-fired power station belching away beside the same motorway junction, adds slick beats and tinkling melodies but still can't disguise a feeling of lingering bitterness.

The Northern Powerhouse? Levelling Up? Bullshit. That's the clear message of 'London's Moving Our Way', an ice-cold slab of foul-tempered pulses, a defiant two fingers to the Westminster lickspittles who, for decades on end, have promised untold riches while delivering little more than pithy soundbites and photo ops for the local rags.

Speaking of which… 'A Brighter And More Prosperous Future' is the perfect sardonic closer, an atonal electronic eyeroll at the kind of vacuous red wall pledges that get ripples of applause on 'Question Time', but ultimately do nothing to help those unable to afford gas bills and margarine in 2023.

And that is why, in every sense, this is the album in which Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan finally shakes off the shackles of the past. There's a battle to be fought in the present, and Chapman-Fox is with us in the trenches.

BOB FISCHER

Label Profile

Label: Cortizona
Location: Lier, Belgium
Est: 2017

Potted History: "When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time with my older cousins and some of their friends were into new wave, industrial and punk," says label founder Philippe Cortens. "So at the age of 13, I became intrigued by the early Front 242 records, and then by the insane mix tapes they handed me a few years later – Klinik, Throbbing Gristle, Negazione, Butthole Surfers, SPK, Big Black, Zyklome A, Crass, Disorder and Einstürzende Neubauten.

"I was totally flabbergasted and only wanted to hear more of this kind of music. At 16, I was kind of obsessed with punk, went to a lot of concerts, and was kicked out of school because I didn't want to cut my hair. I started to work at Studio Brussel and Klara, Belgian national radio, as a music selector and producer for evening shows and music zines. When I discovered 'Planètes' by Jean Hoyoux, I knew immediately, 'This has to be Cortizona 001'.

"And about the name Cortizona – my nickname at Studio Brussel was Corti, and cortisone is a heavy medication which makes you euphoric. Musical drugs on prescription… it makes sense to me. Ha!"

Mission Statement: "I release music I love and find exciting, and that I hope others will also be interested in," explains Cortens. "Just following my guts and heart. I don't want to overthink it too much, but I've noticed along the way that most of what I've put out comes from urgency – a desire to express something that's only possible in music. Or a feeling of freedom to explore undiscovered worlds of sounds, a deep quest into the unknown."

Key Artists & Releases: "So far, I've released a wide range of music, from reissues of hard-to-find analogue synth records by Jean Hoyoux, to an unearthed 1987 album by Nasca. Other artists include Frederik Croene, Ann Eysermans, Mich L, Twinkle 3 with David Sylvian, Brahja, Anna Homler, and The Hafler Trio with Genesis P-Orridge. It's all part of Cortizona and has almost grown organically.

"Upcoming releases include 'Mind Is Mud', the new album by Céline Gillain, which sounds like Grace Jones, Fever Ray and Róisín Murphy have recorded an album together at Berghain, and 'Holiday' by Schntzl, the SpongeBobs of Belgian jazz on a rollercoaster, sliding into 70s electronica, melancholia and big-time pleasure."

Future Plans: "There's lots, but it's too early to talk about them – I'm afraid I'll jinx them. Further on, the plan is to go with the flow, probably against the grain, making lots of mistakes while doing it. Eternal respect and a Top 10 hit… is the last thing I'm going for before I die. I guess I'll have to live forever then."

Any Other Business: "Running a label – it never stops. Coloured vinyl is overrated and 180 gram vinyl does not sound better than 140 gram, it's only thicker. Don't do it for the money, and don't forget to have fun."

For more, visit cortizona.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Balearic maestro **Mark Barrott** on the first and last records he bought, plus an all-time favourite

FIRST

THE HUMAN LEAGUE

Dare

VIRGIN, 1981

"The first album I bought was 'Dare' by The Human League. I loved synthesisers, and they are from just down the road in Sheffield, so off I went to Virgin on two buses. I remember getting 'The Man-Machine' by Kraftwerk at the same time because I liked the look of the cover. 'Dare' is still a great album because of the songwriting and Martin Rushent's production."

LAST

SAULT

Air

FOREVER LIVING ORIGINALS, 2022

"The most recent album I bought was 'Air' by Sault, which is another totally unexpected mind-bender. It blows a lot of recent modern classical out of the water with its bombastic confidence and curveball chord changes. On one level it's super-simple, but the harmonies and depth of instrumentation means I keep finding something new and exciting on every listen."

ALWAYS

STEVE REICH

Drumming / Music For Mallet Instruments, Voices And Organ / Six Pianos

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON, 1974

"An all-time favourite – only one isn't really fair – would be the piece 'Music For Mallet Instruments, Voices And Organ' by Steve Reich. A friend played it to me when I was 17 or 18, and I couldn't quite believe that music like this actually existed. It was as alien, beautiful and hypnotic as my first trip to Japan. We used to drive around the Peak District at night with this on repeat, zoning out to the polyrhythms."

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Happy Land: A Compendium Of Alternative Electronic Music From The British Isles 1992-1996

ABOVE BOARD PROJECTS

Ace rarities from storied sonic disruptors

In the early 1990s, set against a turbulent and divisive political and social backdrop that sought to demonise rave culture, UK electronica and dance music reared up and broadened in scope. With recession, poverty and a cost of living crisis taking hold (nothing changes, it seems), a whole gamut of artists latched on to the energy of burgeoning resistance around them – illegal gatherings, warehouse raves, free parties and such-like – exploring a myriad of multicultural sounds and effusive sonic textures in the process.

Disillusioned and alienated youth tribes threw themselves into this exhilarating new left-field bleep, bass, IDM and acid house with hedonistic fervour, if only to blur the edges of their increasingly humdrum existence, and this excellent compendium pulls together some of the more interesting and diverse underground cuts from that fertile era. Available digitally or as two vinyl volumes, 15 scintillating but very different tracks rub up enticingly against one other.

The Sheffield/proto-Warp vibe is strong. Cabaret Voltaire's 'Soul Vine (70 Billion People)' – from 1992's 'Plasticity' album – sets an ominous tone, sampling 1960s American sci-fi series 'The Outer Limits' against typically angular techno-funk, while Richard H Kirk (as Sandoz) goes down more of a Detroit techno route on 'Armed Response'. Both still feel astoundingly fresh.

Under his Strider B alias, Richard D James offers a heavier take on techno with the thumping 'Linmiri', brilliantly offset with chiming synths and a gorgeous ambient drift. Xeper's downbeat and propulsive 'Carceres Ex Novum', from The Black Dog's landmark 1993 album, 'Bytes', is total head-nodding, eyes-closed, narcotic submersion. And acid house exerts a surprisingly languid influence, as on Thunderhead The Word By Eden's pleasingly sluggish 'True Romance' – try saying all that in a chemically altered state – and Liquid Son's delightfully viscous 'Big Decision'.

Anything goes, it seems. Repurposing the words of an old Victorian political street ballad, Ultramarine's folky and satirical 'Happy Land' (from which the album takes its title) lightens the mood with dubby, pastoral hues, mellow sax and Robert Wyatt singing the phrase insistently until it lodges firmly in your head. For "happy land", read "smiley face".

A dazzling collection of heady, hard-to-find gems, expertly assembled, this is a welcome sonic throwback to a decade of mind-expanding music and good times. Eat, sleep, rave, repeat.

VELIMIR ILIC

A CERTAIN RATIO
1982
MUTE

The year 1982 hangs like a spectre over every groove of this ACR album, which bristles with the same fizz of excitement that ignited 'Sextet', their breakout Brazilian-jazz-meets-post-punk album of that year. Here the standout title track echoes 'Knife Slits Water' from 'Sextet', with its bass-eschewing verses and languid funk beats, but now Jez Kerr, Martin Moscrop, Donald Johnson and co take us on a more modern journey.

This is the story of '1982', which draws on the flavours of their back catalogue to map a new route. Take 'Afro Dizzy', which fuses Tony Allen-style beats to today's electro-street vibe. Or 'Waiting On A Train', where laid-back funk echoes 1986's 'Force', with present-day additions in the form of Ellen Beth Abdi's sultry soul voice and Chunky's Manc rap. Elsewhere, the solid jazz manoeuvres of 'Tombo In M3' and 'Tier 3' prove that ACR's infectious all-night party ethos is still going strong. **MJ**

SQÜRL
Silver Haze
SACRED BONES

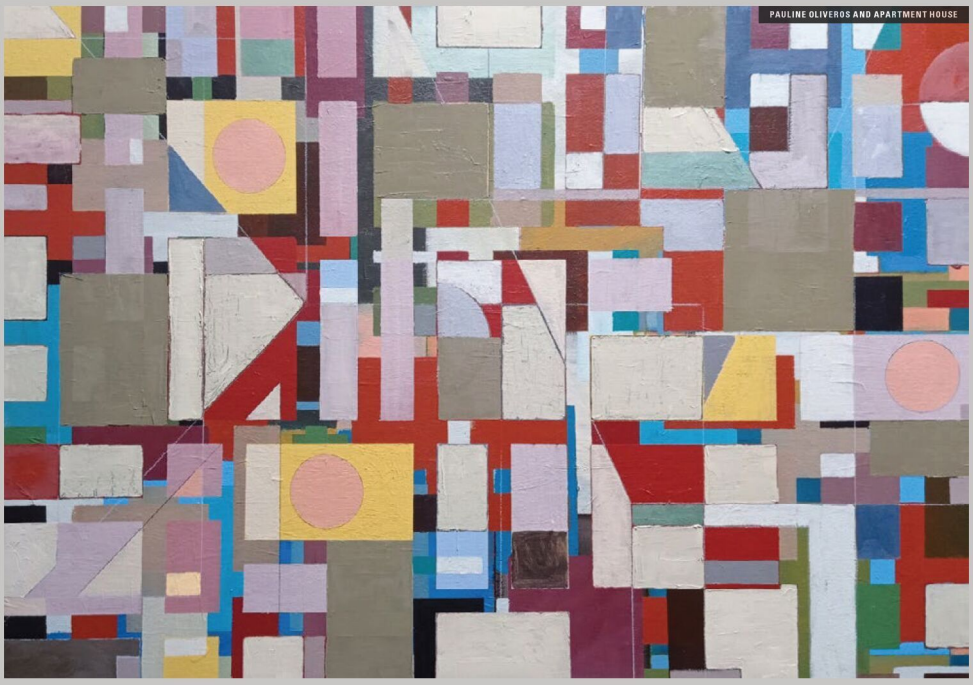
Few debut albums come with as much fanfare or expectation as 'Silver Haze', though few bands are as accomplished or well-connected as SQÜRL. Comprising film producer Carter Logan and indie director Jim Jarmusch, the pair have worked together before on soundtracks, but never on a studio album for its own sake. SQÜRL are arty to the core – as only a band playing a set at this summer's Meltdown Festival, accompanying four films by Dada/surrealist provocateur Man Ray, can be.

Along for the ride are Tom Waits' guitarist Marc Ribot, guesting on a pair of cinematic instrumentals, louche British-German singer Anika, and the queen of Parisian cool herself, Charlotte Gainsbourg, providing a spoken word contribution to the atmospheric 'John Ashbery Takes A Walk', amalgamating two of the titular subject's poems with her clipped, unmistakable tones. Best of all though is 'The End Of The World', a dystopian narrative set in the near future that shares ominous vibes with labelmate (and Jarmusch's fellow auteur-compositeur) John Carpenter. Very good indeed. **JA**

ANDY BELL & MASAL
Tidal Love Numbers
SONIC CATHEDRAL

Which former Oasis member was most likely to record an album of astral jazz and psychedelic ambience? Unless there's something we *really* don't know about Tony McCarroll, it was always going to be Andy Bell. When Essex duo Masal supported Bell at a 2022 show, the conversation swiftly turned to collaboration, and how Bell's banks of chiming guitars could combine with the throbbing synths and plucked harps of Al Johnson and Oz Simseck respectively.

The track titles may be deliberately unwieldy, but the music itself is affectingly simple. The 15-minute opener 'Murmuration Of Warm Dappled Light On Her Back After Swimming' sets the tone, with Simseck's delicate harp effortlessly finding the spaces between gentle guitar noodlings. Fans of Alice Coltrane's late 1960s albums will find much to love, but there are hints of Bell's early days as a pedal-fixated shoegazer too. Notably on 'The Slight Unease Of Seeing A Crescent Moon In Blue Midday Sky', where waves of distortion are the gathering storm clouds on a horizon of perfect stillness. Beautiful. **BF**


PAULINE OLIVEROS AND APARTMENT HOUSE

PAULINE OLIVEROS AND APARTMENT HOUSE

Sound Pieces

ANOTHER TIMBRE

Founded in 1995 by cellist Anton Lukoszevieze, Apartment House have previously tackled compositions by John Cage, Christian Marclay, Christian Wolff, Jim O'Rourke and Morton Feldman. An adaptable ensemble of talented musicians, they are well-suited to interpreting experimental scores dominated by highly open parameters. Such is the case with 'Sound Pieces', which features seven compositions by the late American composer Pauline Oliveros, whose pioneering career spanned electronics and the concept of deep listening.

Six of the pieces are text scores designed for open orchestration, which Apartment House achieve by moving along very unpredictable pathways. While 'Horse Sings From Cloud' is constructed from long, consistent droning textures offset by high-pitched violin squeals, 'Sound Piece' is more intricate, its gestures smaller and fleeting. The final movement is a seven-part realisation of 'Peace/Tree', composed for specified pitches but with ample freedom – an opportunity to hear Apartment House at their dexterous best. **MS**

ELLEN ZWEIG

Fiction Of The Physical

PHANTOM LIMB

Active since the 1970s, Ellen Zweig embodies the dexterous, multidisciplinary spirit of the downtown New York City arts scene. Her grounding was in poetry, and five key pieces from the 70s and 80s are collected on 'Fiction Of The Physical'. Augmented by complex soundscapes, they were constructed using a technique she called the "human loop", where multiple performers would read Zweig's phrases, ultimately creating moments of layered discordancy and natural phasing.

'Act Of Watching' finds Zweig producing a musical tapestry of percussive kalimba, while a wavering electronic tone flutters softly throughout. Under the cloying and impenetrable verse of the bonus track, 'Green Silk', sits a pretty ambient cloud of sensitive and soothing noise, only briefly glimpsed through startling vocals that demand your attention – "dead bodies", "cut", "self-mutilation". "Even words have their limits," says Zweig during the piece. 'Fiction Of The Physical' shows how effortlessly she moves far beyond their boundaries. **MS**

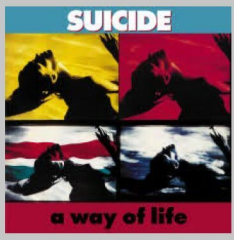
AMON TOBIN

Nomark Selects V1

NOMARK

There's prolific, and then there's Amon Tobin. This collection is a convenient wormhole into some of his multi-dimensional universes – everything, everywhere, all at once. It brings cuts from his Cujo and Two Fingers identities alongside his Amon Tobin output, with the tracklist voted on by members of the Nomark Club, now in its fourth year of providing Tobin addicts with a steady supply of exclusive gear.

The fractured stomp of Two Fingers' 'Golden', its fierce bass arcing like an exposed mains cable, prepares the ground for the deepening mechanical chaos of 'Yumyum Rhythm'. Similarly, 'Mighty Tetra', an Amon Tobin track, apparently spotlights the sound of a virtuoso prog drummer surgically attached to one of Jean Tinguely's self-destructing art machines, while things mellow with Cujo's 'Early For Clink Street' and 'Nine Bars Back', all moody sci-fi jazz. The album plays out in a pleasingly dark yet hopeful way through the Tobin offerings 'In Long Dark Grass' and 'Deep In Time', ending with 'Red Shift' and its unnerving deep dive into the synthetic brain of some alien technology. **MR**



SUICIDE

A Way Of Life

MUTE/BMG

Iconic duo's third album, expanded

Suicide's path from being the punk band so radical that even punks couldn't handle them, to Hollywood-soundtracking, international electronic music treasures was a long and difficult one. But at least the New York duo were eventually able to bask in the recognition of their huge influence before the death of singer Alan Vega in 2016.

'A Way Of Life', which is being reissued by Mute to celebrate its 35th birthday, catches them roughly halfway through that bumpy journey. Their third studio album, of five in total, could not have arrived at a more interesting time, just as electronic music was about to explode into rave in 1988.

That said, 'A Way Of Life' sees the pair stepping back in time as well as forward. After a confused reaction to their exquisite but more subdued second album, 'Suicide: Alan Vega · Martin Rev', this sees them returning to the stripped-down energy of their eponymous debut.

From the reverb-heavy opening seconds of the first track, 'Wild In Blue', it's clear Rev is using the then-recent leaps in technology to subtly enhance the throbbing, convulsing heart of the songs. Vega's vocals, meanwhile, are cast in all manner of sonic shadows via delays and echoes.

'Surrender' comes next, unashamedly wearing its 1950s influence on its sleeve, a slow dance brimming with sincerity and a broken heart, while 'Jukebox Baby' keeps its focus on the same decade but takes a more Ramones-style route to reinventing it, with Vega sounding more like a trashed Elvis than ever.

Things get nastier as we reach 'Rain Of Ruin'. Powered along by a thumping, almost glam rock stomp and gloopy synth riff as the lyrics speak of "Hiding the freezing rage" and "Prophets of speed giving us signs". 'Sufferin' In Vain' and 'Love So Lonely' both mine this darker seam, while 'Devastation' proves the album's most adventurous moment, with new tones and frequencies pushing their trademark sound forward.

This birthday celebration reissue also throws in three live tracks – an amusing overhaul of Springsteen's 'Born In The USA', an early demo of 'Dominic Christ' and a killer version of 'Devastation' which is definitely worth checking out. For fans and newcomers alike, there's so much to get stuck into here.

BEN WILLMOTT

ALISON GOLDFRAPP

The Love Invention

SKINT

Goldfrapp frontwoman goes er, solo

Largely because her surname and image carried the band (and in the public mind at least, were one and the same) it's difficult to grasp this is actually Alison Goldfrapp's debut as a solo artist. As a group, Goldfrapp bounced between styles – from sweeping cinematic mode, as exemplified by their 2000 debut 'Felt Mountain', to 2013's 'Tales Of Us' with its more rhythmic glam-rock-meets-disco style. They were, and still are, one of the few 21st century acts able to nestle firmly in that sweet spot between art and pop and move serenely between both worlds.

And now Goldfrapp returns – without bandmate Will Gregory – to that familiar electropop corner, except this time it's a more modern take, less of an overt tribute to late 70s/early 80s disco, as albums like 'Supernature' and 'Head First' were.

The opener, 'NeverStop', is a dance workout that sees Goldfrapp duet with a Will Powers-style voiceover, but after that it determinedly faces forward. It's clear this is an album that slots in nicely alongside the likes of The Weeknd's sleek electro-noir. Very 2023. And all very good.

In surrendering to the demands of modern pop, sometimes Goldfrapp's own singular personality is difficult to spot. Tracks like 'In Electric Blue' and the Claptone-produced 'Digging Deeper Now' drift by in a fog of dry ice and motorised beats. Her breathy vocals often give the sense that the songs will dissolve on first touch.

Perhaps that's the aim. After all, what would be the point of reprising the euphoric glam stomp of signature hits such as 'Ooh La La' and 'Strict Machine'? Been there, done that. That grit has been replaced by a more nuanced approach, as Goldfrapp cedes the anchors of her previous work in favour of a sound that might float away altogether. Case in point, the single 'So Hard So Hot', which was apparently inspired by last year's heatwave and contains the subtle but pointed lyrics, "It's the nature of now / So love what you've got".

Ultimately, 'The Love Invention' does the job it set out to do – it offers up electropop so gleaming you could eat your dinner off it.

WILL SIMPSON

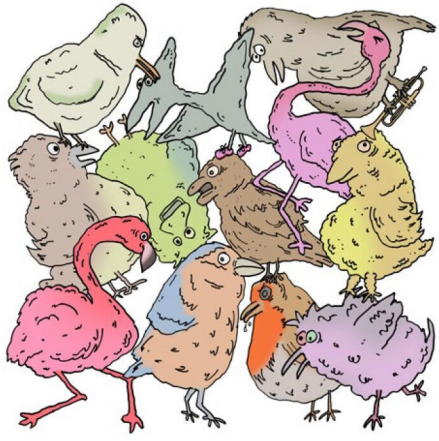
REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
IMOGEN BEBB,
PAUL CLARKE,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
VELIMIR ILIC,
MARTIN JAMES,
PUSH,
FAT ROLAND,
MARK ROLAND,
WILL SIMPSON,
MAT SMITH,
ANTHONY THORNTON,
BEN WILLMOTT

BANGING ON

Yep, the birds are annoying him again.
He's awake early, best stay indoors...

WORDS AND PICTURES: FAT ROLAND

Birdsong. The worst kind of song. It's five in the morning and I'm struggling to sleep. The sounds of Global Communication drift from my stereo as a sonic sedative. I'm cuddling my favourite duvet, with all its familiar smells of sweat, feet and midnight Pot Noodles. And yet, the birds. The stupid, chattering birds. The dawn chorus outside my window seems especially loud this morning. Their incessant musical gymnastics is rendering my soporific ambient music moot. I'll never get back to sleep. I want to march from my bed with a chainsaw. Chop down their trees. Scatter their nests into the wind. But I'm in my most ineffective underpants, and I'm not having the neighbours call the police. Not again.



My intolerance for birdsong is rooted in my scepticism about jazz. My father was a jazz aficionado, and I grew up with a record-crackled soundtrack of wacky trumpets and scat solos. He owned Acker Bilk in bulk, all the Kenny Ball. Everything sounded mixed up and far too jolly, like clowns in a blender. Thank goodness for the quantised 4/4 certainty of rave. Who needs confusing real instruments when you can have trusty buttons marked POP PIANO and SYNTH BRASS on an old beat-up Casio keyboard? That's the problem with birds. They sound like jazz. Notes all over the place, tonnes of tremolo, persistently perky, never shutting up. I wouldn't mind, but they're not even using trumpets. It's all just beak blatherings. Lazy.

Birds have pecked their place into electronic music history. On White Noise's classic 'An Electric Storm', there's a tale of an injured 'Firebird' being fed milk and honey before it bogs off without a please or thank you. Wendy Carlos utilised birdsong on her ambient work 'Sonic Seasonings'. Daphne Oram's 'Bird Of Parallax' sounded like a David Attenborough documentary from the pits of hell. The biggest dance music hit about birds is Fatboy Slim's 'Sunset (Bird Of Prey)', although it was named after a poxy fighter jet and not an actual bird. I hope you're paying attention to all this. There will be a test. Moody noise-prodder Merzbow had '13 Japanese Birds'. And Martina Topley-Bird did vocals for slurry trip hopper Tricky. These aren't jokes for this column, by the way. They're just straight facts. That's what this page is going to be from now on. Me parroting true things with the leaden repetition of a depressed wood pigeon.

Erasure might be the most bird-y synthpop act. There's something about the look of them. Andy Erasure has the appearance of an amorous eagle. Vince Erasure is like a studious owl, judging us quietly with his stare, occasionally spinning his head a full 360 degrees whenever he sees a mouse. Erasure are phenomenally ornithological in contrast to non-bird acts. For example, Aphex Twin is an Afghan hound. The Prodigy are a pack of cheeky monkeys. Boards Of Canada are flatfish. See? Erasure are birdy. Brian Eno is birdy. And those idiots that did 'The Birdie Song' are most definitely birdy.

It's half past five in the morning and I'm scrolling through Twitter. They call it the bird app. The metaphor works. Each user sits atop their own tree, squawking into a rain-grey void while crapping on anyone who dares to come close. The birdsong outside my window is now growing on me, although I'm useless at identifying species common to English gardens. I suspect sparrows, thrushes, possibly flamingos, the occasional pterodactyl. It's probably time for breakfast. A nice bowl of milk-sodden Kellogg's Corn Flakes. There's a rooster on the cereal box, a bird whose cock-a-doodle-doo was famously used in the intro of The Orb's 'Little Fluffy Clouds'. Now that's a birdsong I can get behind. I'll sleep better with less random tweeting and more rooster calls. Less jazz, more cocks. Now where did I put my chainsaw?

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